



ARIA NORTON

A RACE
FOR THE
DUKE'S
HEART

A Race for the Duke's Heart

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ARIA NORTON

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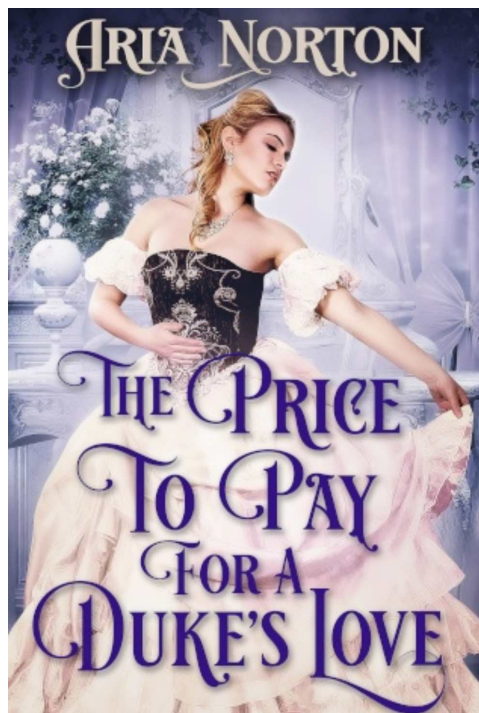
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A Race for the Duke's Heart

Introduction

Laura Pike is not the quintessential English maiden people would imagine. She has never wished to become a lady, but rather enjoys being different... In fact, what keeps her happy is being outdoors and caring for her father, as well as spending most of her time with Patience, her horse. Little did she know her serenity would be disturbed for good when a runaway horse would appear at the bottom of the cliffside along the ocean. Her heart skips a beat though, when she sees its charming owner, Duke Owen Ellis of Blackmoor Manor. In her experience, all dukes

are callous and deplorable examples of human beings, but upon first impressions of him, Laura is left feeling rather enchanted and therefore confused. Will Laura overcome her fascination caused by his enigmatic but warm presence, or will she allow her overwhelming feelings to blossom?

Lord Owen is the only heir of the Ellis name and Blackmore Manor following his father's death. As for his mother, it was expected that her wish for him to marry Lady Marjorie Fielding, a spoiled London heiress, would be fulfilled. Life has other plans for Owen's heart though, as when Laura is brought on as an equestrian trainer and tamer, he encounters

warmth and affection for the first time. However, how could he betray his family's expectation of marrying Lady Marjorie, who despite appearing pretty on the outside, is rather cruel on the inside? A dilemma awaits him, as the journey of becoming the man his father always wanted, would inevitably involve hurting the first woman he ever loved... In the end, which path will he choose?

Forced to choose between love and duty, the future is foreshadowed uninviting, unless Laura and Owen can find a way to overpower whoever tries to keep them apart. Will their love and devotion prove that their romance is

unassailable? Most importantly, how could they both find the courage to ignore tradition, and not dismiss their hearts' one true calling?

Chapter 1

“Your father has been dead for three years and yet you are still unmarried. You can’t produce an heir until you get married,” Lady Phoebe Ellis scolded her free-spirited son.

Lord Owen Ellis, Duke of Blackmore, sat slouched in the high-backed chair, staring absentmindedly into the fire and dreaming about riding his horse. Above the mantle, a stern-looking Lord Ellis glared at him disapprovingly.

A horse crop lay across Owen’s lap. He was dressed to go riding, in brownish-red tweed pants, a matching jacket, leather boots, and a pair of leather gloves to finish off the outfit. He had been on his way out to meet his riding companion when his mother had called him into his late father’s study.

She had been talking nonstop now for twenty minutes and he was bored and eager to get out into the sunshine. The birds were calling; he longed to smell the pine, oak, and moss and feel his horse beneath him as they rode through the woods, jumping over fallen logs and cantering to the cliff's edge where the most beautiful view could be taken in. His mother did not seem like she was going to stop talking anytime soon. So, he sulked and stared at the fire, only half-listening.

“It was your father’s wish, Owen, that you marry and have an heir to carry on the family name. You are our only son—without your son to carry the name, the name of Ellis dies and with it the Dukedom of Blackmore.”

“You speak as if I don’t already know this,” he mumbled.

“Speak up, and sit up—you’re a duke, for heaven’s sake.”

He sat up in his chair.

“You spent too much time in that stable with Jack as a child. You seem to think you yourself are a groom. I know you tend to your own horse; you even muck the stalls.”

“Jack was more of a father than my father ever was, and you were not attentive to me, Mother. I had to find love elsewhere, and Jack was happy and kind enough to fill that role for me. Believe me, if I had a choice, I would be a groom instead of a duke. But I am a duke, and I take my responsibilities as responsibly as I can. No, I am not married, but I’m only 25, and people live a lot longer these days. I have time to find a bride and produce an heir.”

“Your father thought he had more time, but the illness took him. There are no guarantees in life, so we must seize the moments when they come. Now, since you can’t seem to choose a wife, I will, and you will not have any say. Not in her appearance, upbringing, or personality. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal,” he said, still brooding at the fire. “And I don’t care. I don’t care what she looks like, her upbringing, or her personality; she can have rein over the manor house. If I don’t like her, I’ll stay in the stables,” he added defiantly.

His mother sat across from him with a straight back and not a wrinkle in her demure long-sleeved, high-collared black taffeta dress. Gold and garnet jewels decorated the otherwise plain ensemble. Her white hair was piled and pinned neatly on the top of her head while his was hidden beneath a tweed cap, which he now pulled off to run his hands through his dirty blond hair. He sighed loudly. His mother

frowned at him but continued to prattle on.

“Since you will not take your responsibility seriously, I have taken it into my own hands. I have arranged a marriage for you with a proper well-bred young woman. I am in communication with her parents currently, to arrange for them all to visit before the Season begins. When they do, you will be a proper gentleman and you will agree to marry her.”

“Whatever you want, Mother. Marriage is of no importance to me, but it appears my marriage is important to you. So, you arrange it, pick the girl I am to marry, and I’ll show up and be the gentleman you expect me to be. I will provide the heir, give the lady whatever she desires to be happy, and I will spend my life with my horses, which makes me happy. Does that please you, Mother?”

She huffed. “I don't just want you to be married, Owen. I want you to be happy with

your marriage, the way your father was with ours. Happy marriage could be your choice if you had the right attitude about it.”

“So, you’re not pleased.” He huffed, blowing his bangs out of his face.

“Will you not budge an inch?” she asked.

“No, I will not. I will do my duty, but that is all marriage is to me.”

“Marriage is a duty to the woman, not the man,” his mother quipped.

“Well, I don’t agree with that. It’s a duty to me, and that is all it will ever be.”

“Very well, I will arrange your dutiful marriage.”

“Well, it’s decided then.” He jumped to his feet. “I’m off to go riding. Horses are what I care about, Mother. They give me more pleasure than any woman could.”

He paused at the door, his hand on the handle.

“It’s a pity most women don’t care about horses. If I could find a woman who cared about horses as much as I did, well, there would be my perfect match.”

He winked and she swatted him with her fan as he kissed her cheek and headed out. He jogged jauntily down the stairs, whistling to himself, and headed for the morning room where his good friend, Colonel Charles

Godwin, was patiently waiting for him. Charles wore brown breeches and a black topcoat. He had a riding crop and his leather gloves in his hand.

As Owen entered, he spotted Sophia Redman, a young lady who was staying with them at the request of her father, who had asked Owen and his mother to help her find a suitable, titled husband. She was dressed in a lovely white walking dress and in her hands was an embroidery ring. She was clearly flirting with the colonel, who was clearly flirting back. He cleared his throat as he entered, and Sophia, seemingly startled, immediately turned and fled the room.

“Oh Sophia, I didn’t mean to—” he called to her, but she had already vanished. He felt guilty for chasing her away but what could he do?

“Is she afraid of you?” Charles asked, laughing

and pointing in the direction Sophia had run off in.

“Honestly, I didn’t mean to startle the poor girl, or interrupt what I think I saw.” He winked.

Charles cupped his hand to his ear. “What’s that? I do believe Hermes is calling you. Your one true love.”

“So, I did interrupt what I thought I saw,” he probed. “Sophia is a fine catch.”

“Yes, but I’m not.”

“Pish posh! You’re still a nobleman’s son, you still have money.”

“I’m a colonel in the military because I have no money of my own. When my father died, my brother decided to cut us off, saying he needed all the money for his heirs. So, my friend, I am a penniless military man, a woman like Sophia is out of my league.”

“If I were a king, I would get rid of the whole class system and let everyone marry for love. There would be a lot less unhappy people that way.”

“Don’t you know dissatisfaction and oppression make the world go round?” Charles said and they both laughed. “It must, that’s the only reason I can think of that would lead to every ruler having the desire for it.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“No, but they are. Society is.”

“Don’t you dare speak those words in society, you’d be forever shunned for it—and I would be, too, by association. But in private and in all fairness, I agree with you.” Owen grimaced. “I look at my own town and wonder how I can help the people. There are so many poor and downtrodden, but I do not have a clue of what I can do.”

He shook his head, a sigh escaping from him. “I hope my wife is the kind of person who will knit blankets for the poor in the winter and who is not afraid of holding a crying baby or tending to a sick person. Someone with compassion. I do not want a stuck-up, selfish woman who wants to spend all my money on herself when so many people are in dire need.”

Letting his shoulders sink, he continued, “But I

imagine that is exactly the kind of wife my mother has found for me: a shallow, vain, heartless woman who only wants to marry me for my money and title. A woman like that could never make me happy. But that is the way society women are raised, with their noses in the air.”

He heard a gasp and glanced at a pillar.

“Do you have something to say about that, Miss Sophia?”

She did not say a word.

“Not that I think you are one of those women. From what I can tell, you are not stuffy, shallow, or vain. You do not want to marry a man for his money or title—that’s your father’s wish, and I commend you on that.”

Owen smirked as he gave Charles a playful shove, and said to Sophia, “Ignore your father’s wishes and marry for love. You may be poorer for it, but you will also be much happier. Furthermore, I know a man who would gladly marry you, if you wouldn’t mind being a poor colonel’s wife.”

“Owen!”

“Is it true, or isn’t it?”

His friend nodded. “But Sophia deserves better than I could ever give her, she deserves—”

“Will you give her safety, happiness, and love?”

“Yes.”

“Then what more would she need?”

“Stability, for one. I’m a military man; I could be called away to battle at any given moment and, well, I could die, leaving her a poor widow.”

“Yes, and you could fall off a cliff or be thrown from your horse and die. You can’t live in fear of dying, my friend, you would never live.”

“Never live? I have lived through two battles, and I have seen the world—if one of us has never lived, it’s you, my friend. You never leave your estate,” Charles pointed out.

Owen whacked him with the crop and then began running towards the stables with Charles chasing after him.

Charles finally caught up to him and they began walking slowly, enjoying the balmy day. They followed the path to the stables, lined with flowers all in bloom in their beds, their sweet aroma perfuming the air. Owen took a deep breath, momentarily captivated by the gardens. He loved this time of year, as the world was transitioning from spring to summer. It was the perfect conditions for riding, and he wanted to spend every moment he could with Hermes.

“What’s got you bothered this afternoon?” Charles remarked, seeming to notice his friend's suddenly morose demeanour.

“My mother.” Owen sighed. “She has decided it is time for me to do my duty and get

married and produce an heir. I told her I had no interest, so she has arranged a marriage. Congratulate me, my friend, I am engaged.”

“To whom?”

“She did not say.” Owen glanced back at the house, worried realization dawning. “I wonder, though.”

“What,” Charles asked, pausing alongside him.

“If it’s her, I will refuse the match.”

“If it’s who?” Charles asked, not understanding Owen’s meaning.

“Sophia. I know you have feelings for her, and I wouldn’t dare take her from you,” Owen said as they continued. Charles was silent for a moment as he glanced back at the house.

“Her father would never allow us to marry,” he said at last, kicking the dirt with his boot.

“I’m a third son, untitled. I don’t have to face that situation. But at the same time, I don’t get to be with the one I love. I would rather she ends up with someone kind and someone who I know and trust more than any other titled man. She’s a gentle soul, and I’d hate to see it crushed out of duty. Come, now, we’re not talking about me, anyway, we’re talking about you. If it’s not Sophia, who do you think your mother has in mind for you?”

“I have no idea.” They reached the stables, and Owen fussed and fawned over his horse. “Hello, old chap.” He patted his horse’s nose with love. “You ready to go for a ride,

Hermes?” He ran his hand along the animal’s coat till he reached the saddle.

The groom arrived, and Owen greeted him.

“Hello Jack! Did you hear the news? I’m to be married.”

“Congratulations, sir.”

“Don’t congratulate me yet, I haven’t met the woman. Mother has made the arrangements. I am to meet her and her parents at some point before the London Season begins. Mother casually decided it was not worth her time to tell me who they were.”

“Well, I hope she brings you joy and happiness and a healthy heir.”

“A healthy heir, sure, but joy and happiness are very unlikely unless she has four legs and a tail.” Jack and Charles laughed. “I cannot imagine a wife would ever bring me joy and happiness, though I’d settle for a lady who knew her way around horses. Truth be told, though, what lady knows things of that nature?”

Jack laced his fingers and hoisted Owen up into the saddle, not replying. He helped Charles into his saddle, as well, before wishing the men a good ride.

They headed out of the stable yard and across the front of the house to the road. Beyond the road was a wooded area where they loved to ride.

“Promise me something, Owen.” Charles

glanced at the house and, Owen realized as he followed his friend's gaze, caught Sophia sitting in the upstairs bay window, watching them longingly.

Owen scoffed with disdain. The house was aged, brown stone with three steepled roofs on the sides with bay windows, turrets, and maiden's towers. A squat square tower rose from the centre of the roof, and the front of the house was hidden by an arched shrub. An open archway allowed the carriage to bring them right to their door before moving on to the carriage house, and the garden was manicured to perfection. Owen's mother would have it no other way.

Blackmore Manor was one of the largest and most lavish estates in the area, the envy of all. It looked like a castle and everyone admired it, but to Owen, it was cold and drafty and never felt like home, though he had lived there his entire life and was likely to live there for the rest of it. Blackmore Manor had always been the home of the duke, and it would be

his home for as long as his family line continued.

“Don’t give up on the chance to marry for love. One of us should,” Charles said as they passed the house, headed for the wooded area beyond it.

“I was going to say the same to you,” Owen replied. “If I were to fall in love with a woman, completely, she would have to be a horse person—and how many ladies of society do you know who are horse people?”

He chuckled softly. “Ladies ride when and only when they must. They don’t enjoy it as men do, and they certainly don’t know how to care for horses. But if there is a woman out there for me and I find her, then I will marry for love.” He smiled. “Does that please you?”

“It will do, for now,” Charles said.

“Enough of this talk. Let’s give the horses the opportunity to stretch their legs, shall we?”

Charles smiled back and they picked up their pace, trotting across the manicured lawns and past the stone fountain surrounded by a bed of blooming flowers. They leaped the hedge separating the gardens from the untended field and cantered off towards the woods.

It was a beautiful day, and the trees were full of wonderful sounds; birds sang in the branches as they cantered through at a quick pace, jumping over fallen trees. Owen knew the path well—he had ridden it every day since he was a small boy. Jack had taken him under his wing and had practically raised him in the stable.

To Owen, Jack was more a father than his actual father had ever been. Jack had taught him life's lessons and had taught him all he knew about horses. Owen had never been too vain or too proud to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty when necessary. He could find his way blindfolded; he was sure Hermes knew the way as well as he did. Probably even better.

Charles struggled to keep up as Owen effortlessly jumped Hermes over another log.

“Shall we head to the cliff or the beach?” he called out over his shoulder as Charles urged his own horse to jump the log.

“The cliff. I just love that view,” Charles said as he once again circled his horse around and prepared for the jump. At last, he made it and, without praising his horse, he trotted on after Owen, who had picked up his pace again.

Chapter 2

The birds were singing in the trees, the sun was warm on her face, and Laura could smell the sweet fragrance of various flowers in bloom as she walked down the little dirt road leading away from the church, heading home to her elderly and disabled father whom she adored.

In her arms, she was carrying a bag of grain given to her by the church. Her dress was simple, cotton and blue, the colour of her eyes. She wore a delicate brooch at her collar and a black shawl was draped over her arms. Her hair was tied back with a ribbon. She refused to put her hair up; she was not a lady, so why should she try to look like one?

Her old leather boots peeked out from the hem of her dress as she walked. Her toes pinched

because they were too small, but she tried to ignore that as she focused on the world around her.

As she walked, enjoying the day, she did her best to ignore her unwanted companion, the vicar, Adolphus Rumley. Her thoughts were far away, running through the woods on the back of her horse, where she longed to actually be. She was feeling annoyed and a little embarrassed by the sermon that was obviously directed at her.

She had been made the centre of the village's gossip wheel as of late, since the vicar has made his intentions made regarding her, and she despised the attention, both from the other village women and from the vicar.

“Your dress is as lovely as the sky, as beautiful as your eyes, and your hair is like the sky at night, or like the wings of a raven. Yes, yes, your hair is like the wings of a raven. Have

you ever thought to put it up like the other ladies your age wear it? You're not a child anymore, Laura, and it may do you well to act as such."

"I have no desire to look like the other women. I like wearing my hair down, and I'm not about to change that. I am also aware of my age, and I do not care for your pestering me about my appearance."

"Perhaps if you conformed to societal ways, you'd be more likely to find a husband. Then again, I am glad I have no competition for your affection."

"I have no affection for you or anyone else, Vicar. I have no affection for anyone but my father, and that isn't likely to change anytime soon."

“You’re far too pretty a girl to be a spinster.”

“Are you attempting to flirt with me, Vicar?”

“Wasn’t it obvious?” He blushed. “Not very well, it appears.”

“You’re wasting your time—nothing you could say would impress me, or change my affections. I am simply not interested. Good day, Vicar.” She picked up her pace, but to her dismay, he would not be brushed off so easily.

“Look, Laura, I’ve never been good at the courting ritual. I am much better with the sermon, like today’s. I was rather pleased with it. I wrote it with you in mind.’

“I gathered as much, on both accounts.” She

rolled her eyes and kept walking.

He began reciting the sermon, much to Laura's dismay. "When a woman marries, she becomes her husband's property. A woman's duty is to her husband. She must keep his house orderly, cook his meals, and tend to his every need.

"A woman's job is to bear and raise his children. A woman must put the needs and desires of her husband and children before her own. For example, say the woman wanted to go riding. She was used to being free to ride all afternoon, but when she becomes a wife, she must first tend her husband and second tend her children, leaving no room to tend to herself or her own fancies.

"A woman should be the first to rise every morning and the last to bed unless her husband calls her to his bed. A woman—" He reached for her free hand. Laura quickly moved the bag of grain into that hand to avoid

the contact.

“You’re not making your point any better, Vicar,” Laura stated coldly.

“Please, I’ve asked you to call me Adolphus.”

She scoffed. “Why would I call you that?”

“That is my name.”

“I feel it wrong to call someone I am not close with by their first name,” she said, picking up her pace again. He caught up to her and, noticing she was now holding the grain in her arm closest to him, he sneakily moved to the other side of her.

Custom dictated it was necessary for the man to walk on the outside toward the road, so the woman did not get drenched by a carriage splashing in mud, but seeing there was no mud today, that was clearly not a worry on his mind. When he once again tried to take her hand, she turned and dumped the heavy sack of grain into his arms.

“Because you seem overly interested in holding something, you may carry this for me. It’s a far better use of your hands than trying to hold mine because, as I have expressed, I have no interest, and will therefore not give you permission.”

“Laura, I am your best chance at a decent life,” the vicar stated, a look of surprise on his face.

“You think making me serve your every desire is giving me a better life?” She scoffed. “I have

a good life. I am incredibly happy in my life because I have freedom and I can go riding all afternoon and no one tries to stop me. I see to my father's every need, and I still find time to ride every afternoon. If I became your wife, I would die of boredom."

"Boredom? You would be too busy with the cooking and cleaning to ever worry about boredom. Your chores would keep you terribly busy, and when those were done, you would have other duties—the duties of a vicar's wife. A vicar's job is never done, and neither is his wife's." He paused, taking a breath.

"Your father won't live forever, and you're not getting any younger. Do you want to end up in a poor house when your father dies, leaving you in debt? A woman cannot own property—your little stable will be sold, and your horses will be sold to the glue factory. If you agree to marry me, I could offer you a good home and I could pay off your father's debt. I would even let you bring your horses, though there would not be much time for riding between the

chores at home, the duties of a vicar's wife, and your wifely duties. I am a holy man, Laura. I follow God's word to the letter. What better could you find?"

They had arrived at her father's cottage and her horse, Patience, called out to her from her paddock.

"What man wouldn't be better than a man attempting to force himself and his wishes on a woman? As it stands, I always find time for riding." She stopped to pet the nose of her horse. "And another thing, having money doesn't make you holy."

He stopped in his tracks and turned red in the face. Then he dumped the grain back into her arms and stormed off.

She watched him as he walked away,

muttering to himself.

“Why are only men like him interested?” she asked her horse as she stopped to pet her.

“Why can’t I find a nice man who loves horses as much as I do? Maybe a groom from one of the estates. He doesn’t have to be handsome. He just must love me, and he must love horses, not just see them as a tool.”

The door opened and her father appeared.

“I know I am not a lady, but I do wonder if I would be treated better if I were.”

“Not necessarily, my girl. You’re a good person and a man’s behaviour depends on him, not on you.”

“I will never marry, Father, but it doesn’t matter so long as I have you and the horses,” Laura stated confidently as she put the sack of grain away.

He coughed and she turned to him. “What are you doing out of bed?” she chastised as she ran to his side. She hooked her arm over his and helped him back to the rickety old bed.

“You bring joy to me when I see your pretty face.” He touched her cheek lovingly as she fussed with his pillow and blankets, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. Then, she went to the stove and put on a kettle of broth.

“I saw the exchange between you and the vicar.” He started coughing between sentences. “I am glad you sent him away

empty-handed. You can do better than that, Laura. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't."

"Rest!" she scolded. "Once you're asleep, I can go riding," she added with a twinkle in her eye. He laughed, and that sent him into another coughing fit. She got him a glass of water before continuing. "No more talking or laughing," she told him. "I need you to live long enough for me to find my happily ever after."

"You'll find it." He patted her hand. "Just be patient. The right man is out there, just waiting for you."

She stirred the broth and then, using the grain she had been given, she set to making bread. She used the last egg, the last of the salt, and a cup of flour. When the dough was ready, she imagined it was the Vicar's face as his words played through her mind again.

“The nerve of him,” she said out loud.

“What?”

“The vicar’s sermon this morning, it was meant for me.”

“What was it about?”

“The duties of a married woman.”

“Oh, dear.” Her father shook his head. “The man is desperate. You’re the prettiest unclaimed girl in town. If he cannot have you, he will end up with one of the Ryerson twins.” Shaking his head and laughing, he said, “Poor

girls, they got hit with an ugly stick.”

“Jamie Ryerson would make the perfect vicar’s wife. She’s so sweet and everyone already adores her, but I would not even wish the vicar on her. Just the way he talked about how a woman’s duty was first to her husband and then to her children and how she had to put aside her own desires and time for theirs like hers don’t even matter...” She pounded the bread.

“He used me as his example. I love to go riding every afternoon. If I were to marry him, I would not be allowed to do that, because I would not have time. I tend to your every need and I still find time to ride every afternoon. It’s not as though he lives in a palace. The vicarage is not much bigger than this stable. I could easily get all the chores done.”

She grunted and pounded her fists into the

dough again. “I don’t know what I’m carrying on about. I’ll never agree to marry him, and you won’t make me, so I have nothing to worry about.” She threw the dough onto the table and began rolling it out. After filling it with ground nuts and apple slices, she folded it up, sealed it shut, and put it on the baking stone by the fire to cook. She stoked the fire and added an extra log. “Are you really in debt?”

“In debt? Who told you I was in debt?”

“The vicar did.”

“No. I’m old, poor, and crippled, but I am not in debt.”

“He said when you die, if I’m not married, I’ll end up in a poor house.”

“No, if you’re not married when I die, go to a nunnery. At least there you could still ride and I will know you are safe, God will look after you.”

“Yes, that’s what I should have told him, that I’d rather be a nun than marry him.”

“But I do hope you marry and give me grandchildren. I’m elderly and crippled but I’m not fatally ill. I won’t be dying anytime soon, so you can stop fussing.” He started coughing again and she got him a glass of water.

When the bread and broth were ready, she served it to him and then took her own small meal. She washed the few dishes after they’d finished eating, and when her father was finally asleep, she saddled Patience, pulled herself up into the saddle, and headed out for

the woods, straddling the horse's back like a man.

The birds were calling to them and they were obliged to follow. There was nothing Laura loved more than riding Patience through the woods, jumping logs and cantering to the cliff's edge where the most beautiful view was to be had.

The cliff overlooked the ocean, and she could sit there atop her horse staring out across it. Sometimes, she would see whales and other sea life, or ships on the horizon coming and going. She wondered what was beyond the water.

She had heard and read about the Americas. She wondered if it was as wonderful as she imagined; not that she had any desire or way to get there, she just liked dreaming about it. Maybe after her father died, she would sell the stable and book a one-way trip across the

water—surely her chance at a happy life was more possible there if she did not find it here.

The prospects were getting thinner and thinner with each passing day, but she refused to believe that Adolphus or men like him were her only option. Surely, there was someone else. She would hold out if it took, and if it never took, she would be content if she had horses to love.

She heard riders approaching from the west, where the wealthy lived. Not wanting to be insulted or abused by them, she quickly made her escape back to the clearing where she knew they were not likely to go. As she rode away, she could not help but turn and see the most beautiful horse appear on the cliff.

She admired it and then glanced at the rider and gasped—it was Lord Ellis, the Duke of Blackmore. His companion was less elegantly dressed, but they looked dangerous and out

for a bit of fun. She turned away and picked up her pace, afraid she would be caught and dragged into whatever wicked game they chose to amuse themselves with.

Young lords like that were cads. They were self-absorbed, selfish and they took what they wanted when they wanted it. They did not care who got hurt in the end as long as they had their fun. If something did happen, she would be forced to keep it a secret, and he would never be charged or reprimanded for it. And she would be ruined—not even the vicar would want her after that, especially if she bore his child. A child who would be branded a bastard for his entire life. A royal by blood without the right to anything.

She picked up her pace and made it safely to the clearing. Her heart was racing, and she had to dismount and lean against a tree till it stopped and she had caught her breath again. She glanced nervously about, but there was no sign of the riders.

Chapter 3

Owen had only glimpsed the horse's rear as it galloped away. He and Charles were still out riding when the sun began to set. They stopped at the cliff's edge to admire the view as the sun set over the water. There were fresh tracks in the dirt from another horse.

“It appears we chased someone away. Do I have a reputation around here that I don't know about?”

“No, everyone loves you.”

“Do *you* have a reputation around here that I don't know about?” he teased.

“Ah, will you look at that view?” Charles said, ignoring him as they pulled the horses up to the cliff’s edge. “Is there anything more beautiful?”

“I thought Sophia was the most beautiful thing you had ever seen, my friend,” Owen joked.

“Yes, Sophia is more beautiful than this view,” Charles admitted. “But I was wondering what you thought was more beautiful than this view. Surely you don’t think Sophia is more beautiful.”

“No, I don’t find her beauty as alluring as you do. No, I can’t say have ever seen anything more beautiful, yet.”

A sudden noise from behind them spooked the horses and Hermes reared up, catching Owen

off-guard as he flew off the horse to land a few feet away. Then, Hermes took off running.

“Owen!” Charles jumped from his horse and rushed to his friend’s side.

“I’m all right, go after him,” Owen said, picking himself up. Charles jumped back on his horse and raced after Hermes.

After dusting himself off, Owen started grumbling to himself, wondering what had upset the horse. He was a beautiful horse, but quite temperamental and spooked easily. Owen should have been more careful. It would just kill his mother if he were hurt or worse.

He felt guilty as he picked his way down from the cliff. He hoped Charles had found his horse. He did not fancy the idea of losing Hermes.

He was invested in the stubborn horse, both emotionally and financially. He had come from the best breeding stock in the country and had cost his family a small fortune, but the moment Owen had set eyes on him as a youth, it was love at first sight and he would have given anything to make him his.

He longed to find a bride that way, but no one had ever sparked that feeling in him and it was not for lack of searching. He had searched for years for a bride, attending every stuffy ball, and going to Bath each Season, but every year he walked away annoyed and disappointed. All the girls were the same—shallow, vain, and chasing men with titles. There had been many who would have gladly been his wife, but he had not liked a single one.

He was also not like other men of his time. He was still a virgin and intended to remain so till

marriage, for he had no interest in deflowering a poor, innocent girl just for his pleasure, nor did he like the idea of partaking in the sleazy brothels.

He saw sex good for one thing: procreation. He would create an heir, possibly a spare, and that would be it. If the child showed even an inkling of interest in horses, he would gladly teach him or her all he knew. If wanting a wife who loved horses was too much to ask for, then perhaps he could have a child who did.

He was still lost in thought as he made it down to a clearing. He had never been near this area before, had never ventured this far past the cliff. If he wanted to go to town, he would travel down the main road.

He broke through the clearing and instantly he spotted his horse. "There you are, you naughty old boy!"

He stopped, noticing Hermes was not alone. He was being petted by the most beautiful woman Owen had ever seen. Not even her drab brown riding dress could disguise her beauty. He was mesmerized by the sight before him.

The woman was silently standing there, petting him, soothing him. Her back was to Owen, so she did not see him. Then he noticed her horse, the same colour horse as the flank he had seen galloping away. He smiled and slowly approached her horse. He clicked at it and the horse responded, stepping forward, and he rubbed its nose. The horse was beautiful, as beautiful as its owner. He petted the horse while watching the girl continue to communicate with his own mount.

Owen thought he was the only one who could soothe Hermes, but he seemed perfectly content and they seemed to be having a silent

conversation. Hermes's tail swished occasionally, to bat away a fly, but other than that he seemed entirely at peace. It was fascinating. *Not only is she the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, but she has a gift, something I have always desired to learn. Now here, here is a kindred spirit, a woman I could be happy with. Though a beauty like that surely already has a suitor, if not already a husband.*

He grabbed the reins of the other horse and led it over. "His name is Hermes," he said, slowly approaching. "We were out riding, and he got away from me."

"I'm so sorry, my lord," she said and then backed away. He held her reins out to her and they exchanged horses.

She jumped onto the back of hers and rode swiftly away. He had caught her throwing her leg over and smiled. This was a woman who not only knew how to whisper to horses but

who knew how to ride them. He was smitten.

But then his thoughts became downtrodden—she was young, perhaps too young for marriage, he had assessed, seeing her hair free and loose. Women his age were already wearing their hair up. He guessed she was probably in her teens, late teens perhaps, but she still had that childlike appearance.

“Wait! I don’t even know your name!” he called after her. “Could you teach me how to do the thing you did with my horse?” He reached his horse and gave his nose a rub. “You’re not trying to be a matchmaker now, are you, old boy?”

He laughed and then swung up into the saddle. He looked back in the direction the woman had ridden off in. “Let’s see if we can find her.”

He turned his horse in the direction she had fled and they started off, but after some time unable to find her, he headed back towards the cliff to find Charles.

“You found him!”

“Actually, a beautiful woman found him and soothed him. She had the most spectacular raven hair and the prettiest blue eyes, but when I approached, she ran off. I did not even catch her name. You wouldn’t happen to know who she is, would you?”

“A woman with raven hair and blue eyes? I have seen someone like her around the village, but no, I am afraid I don’t know who she is. I could ask around for you. What do you want her for?”

“To thank her properly, for finding and calming Hermes so that I didn’t have to run all over kingdom come to find him,” he said aloud, but in his mind, he answered, *my wife*. Owen started home, forcing Charles to catch up.

“Could it be? Owen Ellis, in love?”

“Hardly, I just feel a proper thanks is in order. After all, my horse is prize breeding.”

“I’ll ask around town.”

Charles turned and headed towards town while Owen continued to the house. He got Hermes settled in his stall, then he draped his jacket over the door, rolled up his sleeves, and, after unsaddling his horse, he began to brush him down.

“Well, you certainly had an adventure old boy. Did she tell you her name in that conversation of yours?” he teased.

He could not get the picture out of his head. The way she stood so close to the horse, unafraid, the way she expertly rubbed his nose as if she had known Hermes her whole life. The way she had seemed perfectly content standing there stroking the nose of Owen’s horse until his oafishness had chased her away.

He chastised himself, hoping to himself that he was gifted the good fortune of meeting her again.

Chapter 4

Laura was riding Patience along the cliffs and enjoying the beautiful summer day, her hair flying free behind her as they rode. She stopped to take in the view when a horse and rider pulled up alongside her. She recognized the horse and the man on top of it.

Laura turned her horse to leave, but Patience was already moving toward the other horse, expressing some curiosity.

“Well, hello again,” Owen greeted her, removing his hat.

“Hello,” she said curtly, nodding her head.

Only those living under a rock would not know who the Duke of Blackmore was. She could not help but admit he was handsome, but he was way above her station, so she averted her eyes. Men like that did not talk to girls like her, much less court and marry them.

By way of their last encounter, he had already proven he was not the ruthless rogue she had assumed him to be. His father had had quite the roguish reputation, and everyone had assumed his son and heir had inherited that trait, but so far, all he had shown her was a gentleman who knew and understood horses as well as she did. Although that thought warmed her heart, it did nothing to ease her nervousness around him.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did for Hermes. You have a way with horses that is remarkable.”

“My father was a groom, he taught me well.”

“Was?” he probed but she would not elaborate. “I am Owen Ellis.”

“Yes, I know who you are, your grace.” She nodded her head.

“Owen, please. Might I have your name?”

“What for?”

He laughed. “Well, no need to be haughty.”

She did not find that remark amusing.

“I was simply asking your name so I could thank you properly for finding my horse.”

“He found me.”

“Yes, I imagine he did, he’s always been attracted to beautiful women.”

She was looking down, so she did not see the smile or the twinkle in his eyes when he said it. She was nervous and ready to bolt and yet she longed to be with a man like him—not for his title and wealth, but for his obvious love for his horse and his obvious knowledge.

“You’re a horse whisperer. I have always wanted to learn how to do that, could you teach me?”

“I’m sorry, but I must be on my way. Good day, your grace.” She nodded, without addressing his question, and then turned to ride off. Owen and Hermes caught up to her.

“Then your horse’s name,” he called out to her. “At least tell me that,” he added.

“Patience,” she said after a moment as she slowed so he could catch up.

“A good name,” he said, riding up beside her. “A good name for a beautiful horse. You were on the cliff, and I fear my friend and I startled you and frightened you away. If that was the case, I apologise for it. Next time, you need not run; there’s room for everyone up there.”

“Thank you, your grace. It appears you’re an excellent rider,” she noted.

“I could say the same about you. I always admired a woman who could ride, and I see you’re not riding side-saddle.”

“Believe it or not, that is the most uncomfortable position. If you wonder why most women do not like to ride, it is for that reason. My father taught me properly. I have been riding since before I could walk. I’d wear breeches if I could get away with it.”

“So was I.” He smiled. “And I would love to see a woman in breeches.” She could tell he was not being sarcastic. “If you were my wife, I would buy you a pair of breeches and if anyone said a word against it, they would have to deal with me.”

“Then it is a good thing I’m not nor ever will be—saves you the embarrassment and

trouble.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be embarrassed. I would be proud, proud to have such a woman.”

“Well, good day.”

“Amuse me for a moment more,” he begged. “It’s been a while since I’ve really let this old boy stretch his legs and it’s such a beautiful day. What do you say to a race?”

“A race?” she asked, taken by surprise but filled with great joy. Never had anyone challenged her to a race, let alone a duke.

“You seem to have a good handle on Patience, and I think, thanks to you, I have a good handle on Hermes today. So, what do you say?”

The stakes are, if I win, you have to tell me your name.”

She laughed. “And if I win?” she challenged, expecting him to say she would never have a chance, but he did not. Instead, he let her decide what her prize would be.

“What do you want?”

“To ride your horse.” She nibbled her lip.

“That’s all?” he asked, surprised and seemingly taken aback by her simple request. “You could have anything, and all you want is to ride my horse?”

“Yes, he’s such a beautiful horse and, well, I would have ridden him the other day, but I

didn't want to be accused of being a horse thief, and I didn't know who he belonged to."

That was a lie—she had known exactly who the horse belonged to, after seeing his rider sitting atop him on the cliff. She'd had every intention of taking him home to Blackmore Manor, but she had gotten so caught up in the moment bonding with the horse that she had forgotten to return him.

"All right, if you win. You can ride Hermes any time you'd like," he added. "Just tell Jack at the stable that I said so. I'll tell him I said so, so he won't question it."

"You're only saying that because you don't think I could win," she challenged.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure you and Patience will leave me and Hermes in the dust, if the

old boy doesn't throw me first." Owen laughed and patted the horse's neck. "You'd let the nice lady ride you, wouldn't you, old boy?"

"You call him old, is he really that old?"

"Fifteen years, I've had him since I was ten years old."

"Patience is barely five. I used to ride her mother," she explained. She looked up and caught his eye.

He was looking at her, listening to what she had to say. They were not lord and peasant, but two people connecting over horses. It was the greatest thrill of her life.

"Hermes, will you be nice to your master so

that we can race fairly?" she asked, leaning forward to pet him on the nose. The horse whinnied. "All right, you're on."

She sat back up, turned Patience around, and took off. Hermes was hot on her heels. As they raced toward the forest, Hermes pulled out in front of Patience and Owen looked back at Laura, not seeing a low-lying branch in front of him.

Laura raced to catch up with Lord Ellis. Poor Patience did not share the extremely long legs of the thoroughbred steed the lord was riding. She urged her horse on with soft words and movements, yet she was losing ground. He was an extraordinary horseman who obviously knew how to get the most out of his mount without harming it in the least.

She thought all the better of him for that gift. Few men of his station cared so much about their horses, considering them to be

possessions that could easily be replaced. Laura could tell that Hermes was important to Lord Ellis, and not simply due to his monetary value.

In horror, she watched as he slightly turned in his saddle to look behind him and estimate the distance between them. He did not see the low branch ahead and was in danger of hitting it. He slid a bit in the saddle, which had Laura gasping. He was surely going to be knocked completely off his beautiful horse by the large branch.

Long black hair was beginning to escape the confines of her chignon and blow into her face, obstructing her vision and her mouth. Laura was forced to bring Patience to an abrupt halt in order to shout a warning.

“Duck!”

Lord Ellis swung his head forward once more and ducked just in the nick of time. He missed the branch by less than an inch. However, he did not stop his progress. He continued the race as if he hadn't just come so close to being beheaded.

Laura spurred Patience onward and entered the race once again. She knew in her heart that it was too late to win, yet she felt it was important to try. Her opponent's dark blond locks glistened in the sunlight far ahead. With a determined expression on her face, she leaned slightly forward as if she could add speed to her horse's already thundering hoofs.

"Come on, Patience," she urged. "I cannot bear to lose. I do so wish to have a chance to ride that magnificent animal. I do love you, but that horse is beyond my reach unless the lord allows me my wish."

Patience did her best to please Laura. Her hoofs dug into the grassy meadow, hurtling them toward the same branch Lord Ellis had evaded. However, she was not in the same class as Hermes. He was larger, faster, and likely more experienced. He seemed made to run like the wind.

Lord Ellis was awaiting her at the designated finish line, the hillock at the end of the woods. His smile was wide and a bit smug. It appeared he was quite pleased with himself.

Laura admitted to herself that he had good reason to be proud. He had managed to avoid a nasty accident and still win the race. She admired his aplomb as well as his form.

“Well, it appears I have won the race and the bet. I would now ask that you fulfil the terms of the bet by telling me your name. I am not certain why you saw fit to withhold it in the first place. Are you so shy you fear me having

that knowledge, or is there some oddity about you that you are concerned I will learn once I know your identity?" Lord Ellis asked.

"I do not fear you in any manner. I simply did not imagine my name could be of much importance to you. Then, you offered a challenge that gave me hope I could win a ride upon your handsome steed. It gave me greater incentive to withhold that which you asked of me." Laura used her haughtiest voice.

Obviously undeterred by her tone, Lord Ellis let out a loud laugh. He visibly relaxed in the saddle, allowing his shoulders to shift so that his forearms rested upon his saddle.

"You are definitely not the shy young woman I imagined. You are a free spirit with a hidden backbone of steel. I find that very appealing. Now, it is time to pay up. I ask again for your name, please. You owe me that, as you promised."

Laura felt the laugh deep under her skin. It caused a response inside her she did not clearly understand. She also quite liked the gentleman's quick wit and his evaluation of her character. It pleased her to know he found her interesting rather than insipid.

Tilting her head coquettishly, Laura replied, "I do indeed owe you my name. I am Miss Laura Pike. I do not know what value you will find in that knowledge, yet I will not renege on my promise. I do wish I could have won, however. I truly would have enjoyed a ride on your horse."

"I do believe Hermes is disappointed, as well. Perhaps we can fulfil your wish at another time. I am sure we shall meet again. Good day to you, Miss Laura Pike."

Laura was not so certain she would be in a position to speak with Lord Ellis again, nor have another chance to borrow his beautiful horse. They simply did not run in the same circles. This encounter was a true anomaly.

Laura talked to her horse as she made the ride to the small cottage she lived in with her father. She hated knowing her home was on land belonging to Lord Gundry and that he still held power over them. Yet, it was the only home that was within their ability to rent.

“Patience, my beauty, you deserve a special treat for your efforts. You gave me all you were capable of, and I do appreciate it. I am so sorry that you were outclassed. Rest assured I adore you no matter whether you win or lose. I shall brush you and find an apple to show you how much you are loved.” Laura spoke softly as she stroked the tired horse.

“Oh dear!” she exclaimed upon seeing there

was an unwelcome visitor at the cottage.

Lord Gundry, the landlord, was standing over her father and shouting. She heard his words as she dismounted.

“You are once again in arrears on rent. I need that money immediately. I will not continue to allow you to remain on my property if this happens every month. I can easily replace you with other tenants, ones who are more capable of working.”

“We will get you the money. We always do,” Harry Pike answered.

“I never receive it on time. I always seem to have to threaten you first. I will not stand for it,” Lord Gundry yelled with a fist in the air.

“That simply is not true! I refuse to stand and listen to such defamation of my father’s character.” Laura could not hold back the outburst.

The landlord was a nasty, ill-tempered man. He refused to acknowledge that it was her father’s expertise in horse breeding that had his stables full of priceless horses. Once her father had become injured, the man considered him a useless entity and thus an unnecessary nuisance. They were only allowed to remain on his land to avoid the animosity of others who found fault in Lord Gundry’s attitude. The rent seemed to mollify him for short spans of time, then his animosity arose all over again.

“You do receive it on time most months. It seems to pleasure you to harass a crippled man.” Laura boldly dared to point out the faults of the arrogant man. At this time, her manners meant less than nothing to her. She cared naught about what the landlord thought

of her.

Lord Gundry's sly gaze moved toward Patience. A gleam of greed came into his eyes.

"Perhaps you can make a deal with me in your father's stead. Relieving you of a horse to feed would ease your monetary burden. It would also suffice to pay your rent for another month. I will allow you to trade me a horse in exchange for remaining on my property. This one will do nicely."

A prickle of fear and a spark of hatred gave Laura the courage she required to speak her mind. There was not an ounce of concern for herself or her dear father as she stood her ground against the calculating landlord.

"I most certainly will not trade any horse we own or care for to you. I swear I shall have

your rent within the week. You shall, by all means, receive the money due you; however, the horses are not now, nor ever shall be, a part of the bargain. I ask that you leave us in peace so that we may discuss our options. Go away!”

“I will do as you ask for now. But it is only a short reprieve. I will be back and expect a bargain. The price has been doubled. I will take two horses rather than one. Your childish and unladylike outburst will cost you dearly. Think before you speak at our upcoming encounter, unless you’ll accept my previous offer. I’ll be more than happy to waive the rent owed to me, provided you share an evening with me.” Lord Gundry sneered at Laura, cast one final longing gaze at Patience, and walked away.

“My sweet, protective daughter, you know as well as I that we do not have the money he is seeking.” Harry set his sad eyes upon his feisty only child and silently asked her to understand.

“I do know, Father. I simply cannot let any horse, most especially Patience, go to that disgusting, greedy louse. The money he earned off the horses you raised should suffice for a lifetime of rent.”

Harry bowed his head and sighed. Laura knew he loved the horses almost as much as he loved her, and he despised the idea of trading them for rent money as strongly as she did.

“The horse does not need to go to Gundry, nor does it have to be Patience. You may pick another horse and put it up for sale. A neighbour may purchase it and allow you to visit. It is the best we can hope for.”

“Yes, Father. It is indeed our last hope.”

Chapter 5

“Three weeks. I cannot believe three full weeks have passed without finding Miss Pike. Hermes, has she simply vanished into thin air? Has she managed some sorcery to avoid me?”

Hermes whinnied as the saddle was firmly placed upon his broad back. The horse was restless and in dire need of a long ride to ease his tension.

“I know, Hermes. You have a desire to run with the wind. You shall have the chance within moments if you will indulge me by remaining still so I may finish attending to strapping the saddle beneath your belly. I feel I can wait no longer to seek out the young woman.

“I must leave for London soon and I have no desire to go without becoming better acquainted with Miss Pike. She has most assuredly piqued my interest, as well as my curiosity. She seems very forthright in her speech and she has an amazing talent where horses are concerned. You were smitten with her, were you not, boy?”

Hermes's head bobbed up and down as if in agreement, causing a bark of amused laughter to come from Owen.

“Ah, yes, just the mention of her name has an unsettling way of making me joyful. It is a confusing dilemma. We shall seek her out in the village. I have just the correct plan to catch her interest.”

Owen leapt into the saddle, unnerving the restless steed. Hermes pranced in a circle, showing signs of wanting to unseat the

intruder. Owen was a skilled horseman who easily retained control and power over his mount.

“There appears to be a small allowance of wildness remaining in you, my boy. That will play nicely into my current plot. As Miss Pike already wishes to take a ride on you, perhaps we can lure her by proclaiming the need to tame you.”

At the touch of a heel against his side, Hermes went quickly from a standstill to a full gallop. His rider did not feel any fear, only elation. Owen needed the frantic speed as much as his mount. The brisk wind in his face and the challenge of remaining upright on the racing steed were enough to soothe any angst held within him over the frustration of the woman disappearing.

Once Owen left his land of verdant fields and well-kept lanes, the pathway narrowed, and

every turn could be a dangerous one at the speed he and the horse were taking them. Tall trees ran down both sides of the narrow lane and formed a tunnel that brought a measure of darkness, yet Owen was aware that there was no need to slow Hermes.

Both the horse and rider knew the terrain well. Every hole, broken branch, and animal lair were engraved in their heads. If the unexpected did arrive, then they would consider it a challenge worth meeting.

It was necessary to end the adventurous run once the pair neared the village. There were horse carts, buggies, and foot traffic to avoid. Plowing over a child rolling a hoop would not serve Owen well.

He nodded politely as he passed the villagers. He was acquainted with most, if not all, of them. The merchants knew him well as he bought their wares to maintain the manor and

the property surrounding it. They owed him their livelihood and saw him as their champion.

His first stop was at the blacksmith. There, he requested the man travel to the manor to inspect the hooves of every horse he owned for the need of being reshod, though it was unnecessary since the manor retained a blacksmith in residence. While setting a date and time for the visit, Owen politely asked if the blacksmith knew of someone who could help tame Hermes.

The blacksmith frowned in thought before saying, "I truly want to help you, my lord, though I fear I cannot. I am not aware of anyone with that ability that is not as yet working on an estate. Good horsemen are difficult to find, so once they are established at an estate, they usually remain there until they can no longer fulfil their duties."

Owen did not stop his inquiries once he left the blacksmith. He was more determined than ever to discover where Miss Pike was seemingly hiding. He ventured throughout the village, stopping to converse with merchants, farmers, and even children about finding a person willing to tame his horse. Not one villager knew of such a skilled gentleman. They certainly never concluded that Owen was speaking of a young, single woman.

Eventually, he made it to the small inn. Surely, someone within it had heard of Miss Pike. This time, he was going to ask outright about her. He was tired of the subterfuge he had been forced to use.

Striding up to the proprietor and ignoring the delightful scents emanating from the dining room of the inn, he demanded, "I wish to know if you have knowledge of the whereabouts of a Miss Laura Pike. I am seeking her expertise with horses. I am told she has a special talent for taming them."

“Yes, my lord, I do know of this fine young woman, although I do not know of any special talent she might possess. It was only a short time ago that I heard she was seeking to sell a horse. I was told she was asking for a great deal less than it was worth, a bargain. I should imagine you would like such a good purchase to add to your stable.”

“It may be a wise purchase and worth looking at, or your information may be entirely incorrect. I have encountered both more times than I can count on one hand. Please, tell me where I may find her and this infamous horse. I will judge the steed myself to see if he is worthy of a home at the manor.”

It was difficult for Owen to contain his eagerness to receive the information in front of the proprietor, yet he held himself calm and collected. On the outside, he was the elegant, well-mannered gentleman that he was expected to be. However, on the inside, his

heart was racing with more speed than Hermes put forth in any race.

“I must apologise for my ignorance. I do not know exactly where Miss Pike resides. I know it is outside the village, no more than that. You may be better off making your inquiries of the vicar; he is touted to know every family in the area. It is a part of his vocation to watch over them.”

Owen was not happy about the need to involve the vicar. He found the man to be pompous and overly eager to gain entrance to society by pleasing those above him in rank while disregarding those who truly desired his aid.

Unable to think of another, less unpleasant choice, Owen proceeded to the vicarage. The old cottage was nicely kept and recently whitewashed. At the very least he was impressed by the fact that either Vicar Rumley

or the villagers cared about the upkeep of the home. It had stood in the same spot for many decades and held various men of the same vocation.

Owen found Rumley perusing the garden behind the vicarage. It may have been that he was considering what to pick as part of his next meal, for the garden was filled with ripe vegetables of many different hues that would please the palate.

“Good day, Vicar Rumley. It appears your garden is thriving. I am certain the proceeds from it keep you quite healthy. There may be more than enough so that you can share with your neighbours. Do you enjoy gardening?”

“Ah, Lord Ellis, it is a pleasure to have you appear at my home. No, my lord, gardening is not one of my many leisurely endeavours. The ladies of the village are kind and caring. They see to the care and keeping of the garden in

my stead. In return, I allow them to take some vegetables to cook for their less fortunate families. Digging in dirt ruins my hands and I find it slightly beneath my station. I have no doubt you understand my thinking.”

Owen most definitely did not understand such pompous ideals. The vicar made it sound as if the ladies of the village were lesser beings than himself which the duke found to be rather offensive. His impression of the vicar lowered the more the man spoke.

“I must say I do not agree. I find getting my hands dirty by digging in the soil to be quite calming. It gives me quiet moments to consider my more difficult duties. It is soothing, and I am often inspired with new ideas for eliminating troubles. Perhaps, you should try it. It may give you some insight into the villagers that alters your unfortunate view of them.”

Rumley waved a dismissive hand. He seemed unconcerned over the chastising words of the duke. They simply did not penetrate his selfish brain.

“I will continue to leave the mundane duties to the village women. I do not enjoy the inordinate amounts of leisure time that those of your fine stature or those of lesser station are privileged to possess. I have more important work to do than to get on my knees and dirty my clothing.”

“I see. I would ask as to what those important works might be, however, I have other subjects to speak about with you. The proprietor at the inn reminded me that you have more knowledge of the villagers and those who reside just outside it than any other among them.”

A smile that was both smug and self-satisfied replaced the questioning gaze the vicar had

previously donned. He saw the observation as a compliment and revelled in the fact that it came from a duke. His pride rose by several degrees.

“I am sure you will discover that the innkeeper is correct. I know each villager by name, and perhaps more about their lives than I should. There are many who confide in me, as I am so trustworthy. Is there a particular villager you have in mind? Has one stolen from you, my lord? I can most likely speculate on who has caused you trouble. I am aware that some among us are not as honourable as I am.”

The gleeful gleam in the eyes of the vicar was repugnant to Owen. He did not care for gossipmongering or spiteful injury to a person. He would avoid that conversation at all costs.

“There is no trouble. I am simply in need of directions. I am searching for Miss Laura Pike.

I understand she has a horse for sale and I should very much like to have a quick look at it. I am always seeking good horseflesh to build my stables. I am also told she has a way with horses that few of us possess, and I may seek her guidance in further taming my overly spirited mount.”

“Miss Pike is a rather special specimen of the female persuasion. I have been told she has an extraordinary talent when dealing with horses. I do believe the talent issues from her father. He was once a horse breeder on the estate of Lord Gundry, and a grand estate it is, if truth be told. It is said Harry Pike is the reason the estate is so prosperous, although Lord Gundry will not admit to it.”

“Then it is fully understandable that Miss Pike has the necessary skills to aid me. Is it possible for you to take a few moments away from your various and sundry important duties to show me the way to her cottage?”

The vicar preened as he felt he was being highly praised. He did not recognize the hint of sarcasm in the way the words were spoken.

“I will gladly walk with you to the cottage she shares with her crippled father. The man lost the use of his legs, you see. It was an accident with a horse. Lord Gundry has been very kind and allowed them to rent a tiny cottage on his land for a small sum. We shall find them both in residence at this time of day.”

Owen frowned deeply, feeling extreme concern over the situation. It seemed less than kindly to have such a valuable former employee reduced to paying rent when the man was obviously injured while serving Lord Gundry. In his estimation, the man should have been given free room and board for life due to the prosperity he had gained for his employer. The situation appeared unfair.

He would think about how such an agreement could be altered in the future. Until then, he was overjoyed to be on his way to see Miss Pike once more.

Vicar Rumley babbled beside him as they walked down the lane. The man could talk the ears off a horse. Owen heard very little of what he said. His thoughts were instead on Miss Pike. He fully remembered her lovely cheeks being rosy from the wind and the mad race they had participated in together. He could still see her inky black hair escaping the dignified chignon at her neck and whipping about over her beautiful face as she rode pell-mell behind him. Her warning to duck had saved him from certain embarrassment and possible grievous injury. He desired to thank her for her diligent observation as he had neglected to do so at the time. It was a misfortunate miscalculation.

Vaguely, Owen heard the vicar repeat his name. He momentarily gave the man his ear.

“I should very much treasure the chance to become better acquainted with you, Lord Ellis. I have aspirations of becoming friends with someone such as yourself. I do believe it would be of benefit to both of us. Would that be possible?”

Owen was often treated as a desirable acquaintance. Yet, he could not see how this one could benefit him in any manner. He counted very few acquaintances as true friends. Only Charles was allowed close enough to know every bit and piece of him as his trusted and valued friend. This obnoxious little man had not shown himself deserving of such a privilege.

Yet, Owen was not a spiteful man. The vicar was showing he could be quite useful at the moment, and he himself had been very inattentive as they journeyed down the lane. He owed the man a small favour.

Offhandedly, Owen replied, "Perhaps, you may like to come to tea some sunny afternoon. My cousin, Miss Sophia, would most definitely appreciate a bit more company. She often has guests at the manor. I do not doubt you would find her both beautiful to look upon and amusing to converse with."

"It does sound most delightful. I have always wished to be invited to the manor; it is a goal I have set forth for myself. You have now made that goal obtainable. I do thank you for the offer. Is there a day which is better for Miss Sophia and yourself for entertaining?"

Owen did not hear the question—he had caught sight of Miss Pike. Her serviceable brown dress blew against her legs and her hair was once more escaping the confines of her chignon. He had never in all his days seen anyone so beautiful.

However, it was not those beautiful features that had him staring in dismay. It was the distressed look upon her face that drew him quickly forward.

The tall, imposing man standing in front of her was holding out a small bag of coins. At their side stood the horse Miss Pike had been riding when they raced.

It was impossible to grasp the idea that she would be willing to sell her precious mare. He had observed for himself how attached the pair were to each other. Something terrible must have occurred to force her to sell the horse she loved so deeply.

As he approached, he could see more clearly. Miss Pike showed anger behind the distress. Her tiny hands were clenched into fists. Though her face was pale, her cheeks were reddened. She was barely holding back tears.

The horse must have felt her distress. It was shaking its head and pawing the ground in an agitated manner. Concerned for the safety of Miss Pike, Owen rushed ahead, leaving the vicar to fall behind. Nothing mattered at that instant except the woman who appeared to require a saviour.

Chapter 6

Laura was distraught and had been since the landlord confronted her father over the rent. She had searched for another solution to resolving the problem other than sacrificing a horse in order to obtain the money. None had come to mind, though she had hoped for a miracle.

There were only two horses in the stable, Patience and one other. Patience was the only one of the two that was worth any money. The other poor nag was old and cost more to feed than it was worth. Laura kept her because she had a soft heart. The horse had once been a fine mare, providing several fine colts to her former master. The poor creature deserved to spend her last days warm and well-fed.

It was breaking her heart to sell her beloved

Patience. She would not consider doing so if she were not in desperate need. For once, she had to think of her father's needs first and her own desires last. Without selling Patience, they would be without a home. She could not allow her father to be forced to dwell in the woods, where the rain and cold would most certainly bring about his demise.

A broken heart was little enough to give for all the years her father had taken such good care of her. She would do her best to see that her darling horse was sold to someone who would love and care for it in the same manner as she had done. The well-dressed, sandy-haired man before her could be that someone.

“Good day, young lady. I have come to speak to the master of the house about purchasing a horse I have recently learned was for sale. May I ask you if he is available?”

“My father is not the one selling a horse, sir.

Patience is mine, so it is I who you are here to see. If you are truly interested and do not have a problem with making a purchase from a woman then I will retrieve Patience from the stable so you may have a good look at her. She is a fine mare that will give you many years of service.”

Laura was aware that her voice was shaky and her demeanour less strong than she had intended to present. As hopeful as she was that this man would be the saviour she so desperately needed, she was conflicted and frightened over losing Patience. She feared the man would see an easy mark and short-change her if he noticed her condition.

The man looked her over with a calculating stare. The perusal made her more nervous and uncomfortable. She fidgeted beneath his gaze, her hands twisting into the material of her skirt.

“I, of course, would rather deal with a gentleman. However, I am not averse to speaking with you if I must. I assume you have been given the authority to sell the horse and accept the money on behalf of the owner.”

Laura was growing frustrated with the man. His attitude was less than desirable. She was not sure she wanted him to make an offer on her dear horse, even one that would more than cover the rent.

“As I have already explained to you, Patience belongs to me. I am her owner. There is not another person to speak to in my stead. I am aware that it is an unusual occurrence to discuss these dealings with a female, however, that is how it must be. Shall I go bring Patience out to meet you?”

“That would be desirable. I need to see this horse in the light of day to examine it for flaws. You may claim it is of sound body, but I

know that may not be the entire truth.”

“I assure you, sir, I do not lie. In this case, there is no need for it. Patience is strong, fast, and a perfect specimen of fine horseflesh. I have no reason to exaggerate. It is an easily proven fact. I shall return in a moment.”

The solitary walk to the stable was the most difficult walk Laura had ever taken. Her throat held a lump that could not be swallowed. Her blue eyes burned with unshed tears. This was most certainly the last time she would ever lead Patience from her stall. Today, she was going to be forced to say goodbye.

“Do not forget me,” she whispered to Patience as she slipped the bridle onto her head. “I promise, I will not forget you.”

The horse bumped her shoulder with her

mighty head.

“I love you, as well. I swear, I will not let him take you if I see any sign he will cause you harm. Father would not want that any more than I. We would both gladly suffer living in the woods around a campfire if it meant keeping you safe from harm. I will ask that I be allowed to visit. I cannot bear to think I will never see you again.”

Unable to delay any longer, Laura led Patience out of the stable and into the sunlight. She was aware of the man watching every step the horse took for a limp or unsteady gait, yet she knew there was no fault to find in Patience.

“The horse is not as young as I had hoped. However, she may be suitable for my youngest son. The boy needs a horse that is calm. He is wary of the animals and must learn they are simply necessary tools. This one appears tame enough. After all, it is giving you no trouble.”

Laura held her tongue. There were many unkind things she wanted to say, yet she knew she could not. It did not matter how the man treated her, only how he treated her precious horse.

He examined Patience thoroughly. He checked her teeth, her legs, and her hoofs, then looked for scars and lumps, as well. Once he was finished, he told her what he wished to pay for the purchase of the horse.

Laura was horrified, and understandably so. The offer was far below what Patience was worth, and only half what she was asking. It was an insult to both her and Patience. Worse than that, it was not enough to cover the rent. She was certain the man could easily afford much more. His manner of dress spoke of his wealth, as did his perfect diction. He was cheating her only because she was a woman and he felt she could easily be duped or

intimidated by a man. Tears of frustration and anger filled her eyes, but she did not allow them to fall.

“You, sir, are trying to swindle me because you do not believe I know the worth of my own horse. You are wrong. Being a woman does not make me a fool. I cannot accept your offer.”

“I suggest that you take what is offered. There are few in close proximity who can afford to buy a horse that does not pull a plough. A riding horse is a luxury, not a need. I do not imagine you have had many callers.”

“It is not enough! Patience is an exceptional horse, from equally exceptional stock. She is worth far more and what you have offered is well short of a fair price.” Laura felt her face crumble. The tears she was holding back threatened to fall uncontrollably down her cheeks. She had lost.

“Let me end this disagreement immediately,” a deep, out-of-breath voice interrupted.

Laura had not noticed the arrival of Lord Ellis. She had been too preoccupied with the man who wanted to purchase her horse for almost nothing. She was shocked and dismayed that the duke had been witness to the exchange of words.

“What business is this of yours?” the man demanded to know. “Did this woman lie to me? Is the horse not hers to sell?”

“The horse was definitely hers to sell, however, it is now mine. My offer was made earlier. I have brought the coins to cover the agreed-on price. You may take your leave, sir.”

“Wait just a minute! You cannot take this horse. I have made an offer and the woman was about to accept it. I have the money in hand, therefore I was the first here that can claim the horse.”

“Has the lady shaken your hand and accepted the money? I assure you, we shared a handshake just this morning. Therefore, the horse is mine.”

The man turned on Laura and shouted, “You are the swindler! You were playing me against this man in hopes of receiving a higher offer. You should be ashamed!”

“Do not be rude to Miss Pike. She had good reason to believe I had chosen not to return to seal our bargain. I am far later than expected due to some unfortunate circumstances. The misunderstanding is my fault, not hers. The

deal is done, so please take your leave. You can find another horse more suited to your paltry offer. This one is not the nag you are trying to portray her to be.”

The man gave Laura one final scowl meant to frighten her, then abruptly turned his back and marched away. As he passed the vicar, he spat, “She is not a proper lady. She is nothing but a lying cheat.”

Vicar Rumley chuckled at the comment, earning himself a dark, peevish scowl from Laura. She found his chuckle to be an agreement of sorts to what the awful man had stated. It did nothing to raise her opinion of the vicar. Indeed, she was realizing he did not hold her in high regard as he so often pretended.

She did take notice of the fact that Lord Ellis found no amusement in the words spoken in haste as the man departed. Though he made

no comment to admonish the man, neither did he laugh. He seemed to be a good man, yet so had many others.

She was now embarrassed that the duke had obviously heard much of the conversation she had shared with the man, which meant he was also privy to her dire need of money. She dare not look him in the face. She feared she would discover pity showing in his eyes and she simply could not bear it.

She began to lead Patience back to the stable. To her consternation, both the duke and the vicar followed in her footsteps.

She hastily lifted a brush and began to use it on the horse, keeping her back to both men. A sigh escaped her lips when she realized neither was departing due to her continued silence, as she had hoped.

She knew Lord Ellis understood her embarrassment and her reticence to speak. She could practically feel the compassion emanating off him as he approached. Her conversation was not intended to be overheard, and yet he had done so by walking up unexpectedly. She braced herself for the apology she realised would be forthcoming.

“I apologise for distressing you, Miss Pike. It was not my intention to spy on you. It is just that I saw you from afar and you appeared to be grieved. I rushed to see what I could do to ease your troubles. Once I heard the conversation, I could not stand by and allow the man to bully you.”

Her hand stilled on the horse as he spoke. His tone was gentle and kind, not condescending or cruel. He was not making light of her troubles or showing an ounce of pity. If he had been, she could not have remained standing so near to him.

“Why did you say you had bought Patience?”
The words slipped from her mouth before she could stop them.

“The man made an offer that was laughable. He was trying to steal this beautiful mare from you. It angered me that he would dare to take advantage of you or anyone. I could not let you make such a deal out of desperation. It would be wrong for you and the horse. The quickest way to end the deal was to claim a prior agreement. I did not think he would dare to call you a liar. For that, I ask forgiveness.”

Laura let his kindness and understanding soothe her for a moment. Her heart needed to know that there was someone who did not take her for a fool and was not too haughty to apologise.

Then, she remembered she had not resolved

the original problem. There was still no money to give Lord Gundry, and the man would not wait much longer before tossing her and her father out of their home.

She reluctantly turned to face Lord Ellis and the vicar who stood behind him, curiously listening to every word.

“I thank you for your aid, my lord. However, I am now left with nothing. Half the money would have been better than none.”

Owen tilted his head and his eyes softened before he gently inquired, “Would the landlord have settled for half? If not, then how would you manage to obtain the rest?”

“Lord Gundry is not an understanding man. You are correct. He would not accept only half the payment. As to the other inquiry, I do not

know how I would obtain the rest. This is the only horse I have worth any price. Perhaps, he may allow me to do his laundry or clean the stables in return for living in the cottage. Otherwise, I may have to accept a less than appealing offer from him,” Laura said hesitantly.

The idea was an abhorrent one since it would cause her to see Lord Gundry every day, but it was the only resolution she found viable.

It seemed Lord Ellis had other ideas as he declared, “I have a better proposition for you to consider. It would be beneficial to both of us. You are in need of rent, and I am in need of someone capable of further taming Hermes. His training is somewhat lacking in several areas. I do believe we can work a trade that allows you to keep Patience, if you are agreeable.”

Laura raised a hand to cover her fluttering

heart. She was unsure of how to respond to such an offer. She did not hold the wealthy in high regard. All her life she had been looked down upon due to her station, and the closest she had been to knowing a wealthy family was during the time her father had worked for Lord Gundry. He had proven the rich were uncaring of those who served them unless there was something the servant could do for him.

She had never heard any rumours of evil deeds done by Lord Ellis, yet she worried that he would want something she could not give.

“Lord Ellis, I am not a horse breeder or one who is trained to tame them. I am a simple country girl.”

“Horses can sense those who will be kind to them. I have seen the way Patience responds to you. She gave you all she had in the race because she loves you. She would have run

until she collapsed if you had asked it of her. You did not, nor would you ever do such a cruel thing. That, too, is obvious.

“I also saw you with Hermes. He was calm with you when he has not been with others who have gotten too close. He nuzzled you without nipping. The fact that he so easily came to your side tells me you can do what I cannot.

“You have a way with horses that I can only refer to as gifted. It is rather magical. All my horses could use a little of your expertise. I love them all, but I do not understand them as you do.”

As Laura listened, her heart softened toward Lord Ellis. She could tell by his tone that he was speaking the truth and that he truly loved his horses. She admired his willingness to show a sensitive side when so many men found embarrassment in caring for mere

animals.

He had shown no interest in her beyond her ability to train an obstinate horse. This eased her mind and allowed her to say, "I would like a chance to try to aid Hermes. I promise I will do my very best to make him less obstinate without breaking his spirit."

"Then we have a deal, Miss Pike. I will provide the rent amount due to Lord Gundry, and in return, you will train Hermes for me. Would tomorrow be a good time for you to visit my stables? You can spend some time with Hermes and be introduced to the other horses as well as the staff."

Laura blushed and replied, "I would enjoy that, my lord. I can be there at half past noon. I must see to my father and the horses here before I can leave."

“I will make certain there is someone available to chaperone you while you are on the estate.”

Vicar Rumley scoffed. “Laura is not a lady. She has no need of a chaperone. She often comes to the village alone.”

“That may be out of necessity, Rumley. Regardless of station, all ladies are chaperoned at my estates. It will be an honour to provide one for Miss Pike.”

Surprising herself, Laura curtsied like a true lady in front of Lord Ellis. She gave him a shy smile, which he returned before leaving.

The vicar laughed uproariously at her for her efforts.

Laura scowled at him, embarrassed by his laughter, and returned to brushing Patience.

Chapter 7

Laura saddled Patience after bidding her father goodbye and seeing that he had everything he needed as near to him as possible. The previous night, she had explained to him the trade she was making with Lord Ellis and he had given his resounding approval. The praise had cheered her and given her the courage she was sure to need once she arrived at the manor.

The large mansion was a beauty to behold. The columns surrounded a wide porch and held up an equally vast balcony above. Shutters were painted black in an odd contrast to the brown stone of the mansion. Bushes with lovely blooms of yellow lined the front of the porch and the pathway to the stairs. Her own cottage could fit into the mansion at least twenty times.

Lord Ellis stepped through the wide double doors to greet her. She could not help but admire how wonderful he appeared in his buff-coloured breeches and royal blue coat. His dark blond hair was ruffled as if he had been running his long fingers through it recently. The effect was quite charming and made him seem less intimidating.

“Welcome to the manor,” he stated as he aided her in dismounting. “I am pleased you were able to arrive so promptly. I expect Trudy, one of our maids, to be here momentarily. She will serve as your chaperone.”

The young woman he spoke of came around the house at that moment. She was very young and had a shy demeanour. Her soft brown hair was almost hidden from view by the cap that covered it. She could not seem to look the handsome duke in the eye.

“Very good. We can now go to the stables. Bring Patience along, she is welcome to roam the paddock while you work with Hermes.”

The stables were as remarkable as the mansion. The building was substantial enough that it touted a comfortably large stall for each of the ten horses housed within. Each stall had a window that allowed in fresh air and light when the shutters were open.

Though the smell made it evident that horses resided within the structure, it was only a faint odor. The stalls were the cleanest Laura had ever inspected, filled with fresh hay and troughs of water. Feeding bags hung on nails attached to the gates.

Horses whinnied and came to greet Lord Ellis. He gave each one a rub between the eyes as well as a few kind words. Laura could see that he loved horses as much as she did. The evidence was before her eyes. Every horse was

groomed and well-fed. None were frightened by his presence.

She lifted her eyes to him and offered up a shy, sweet smile. He held her gaze and returned her smile with a bright one of his own. His eyes lit up and he did not look away even when her lips quivered. His attention seemed to be focused on them.

Only the sound of footsteps ended the mesmerising stare the pair shared. An old man with grey whiskers shuffled toward them from the tack room. His smile emphasised the wrinkles on his thin face.

“There you are. I wondered where you had gone. Were you napping?” Lord Ellis addressed the man.

The man made a face that revealed the duke

had guessed correctly, yet his words were ones of denial. “I have too much work to do to take time out for naps, you scallywag. I was oiling your saddle, if you must know.”

The duke chuckled, which told Laura that he knew the old man was telling a tale.

“I would like you to meet Old Jack. He has been a part of the stables for as long as I can remember. Sometimes he oversteps his bounds to argue with me.”

“Young men believe they rule all. They do not value the wisdom of those that came before them,” Old Jack rumbled in a teasing manner.

“I value your wisdom when it is earned, Jack,” the duke joked. “As you can see, Old Jack and I are more like friends than master and servant. I spent most of my youth here in the

stables learning from him. I cannot do without him. Jack, I would like to present Miss Laura Pike. She is the one I spoke of that will be training Hermes to behave himself.”

“I do not envy you that task, young lady. Hermes has taken small chunks of my flesh more than one time. I do believe I recognize the name of Pike. Would you be the daughter of Harry Pike, my dear?”

“Yes, sir. I am. Are you an acquaintance of my father?”

“It has been years since I saw Harry. We were lads together. I do have a few fond memories of the antics we engaged in and the switches we had to cut from trees for the whippings we got. I must say those whippings were well deserved as we were a little overly rambunctious.”

Laura giggled. She imagined her father and Jack running wild and getting into trouble. She was eager to hear the stories Jack had to tell.

Linking her arm with his, Laura turned her back on Lord Ellis and replied, "I shall enjoy you showing me the stables and introducing me to all the horses. While you do so, would you please regale me with stories of my father so I may tease him this evening over dinner?"

Seeing that Laura was in good hands and instantly friends with Old Jack, Owen left her in the stables. The tinkling laughter Laura emitted as each tale was told followed him through the wide doors.

Once Laura had been introduced to each magnificent horse, given them a carrot, and allowed them to learn she meant them no harm, she settled in to deal with Hermes.

A cough behind her was a reminder that poor Trudy had been standing in the shadows all this time. It did not feel right to keep her in the stables when she could be elsewhere.

“Trudy, you may return to the Manor. I assure you I am quite comfortable here with Old Jack. I do not think your services are necessary. I will be occupied with Hermes, and possibly some of the chores Old Jack should be accomplishing since he seems to be having another nap in the empty stall.”

“I can stay if you are lonely. Lord Ellis has bid me to watch over you. I do not wish to anger him,” the little maid answered shyly.

“He will not be angered. He is a reasonable man and will understand that your time is wasted by standing in a corner while I get

better acquainted with Hermes.”

She softened the words with a smile. Trudy bounced a small curtsy, which amused Laura immensely and reminded her of the one she had presented to the duke only the day before.

Laura spent an hour grooming Hermes and allowing him to become accustomed to her soft touch. At times he became agitated and tried to show his displeasure by nipping at the air near her arm, but never did he actually take a bite. Each time he misbehaved, she soothed him with kind words of praise and understanding. As the hour came to an end, the horse fully accepted her as a friend and master. He was learning quickly.

Laura allowed Old Jack to continue sleeping and gave some grain to the horses herself. The sound of hoofs clomping on the hard-packed ground drew her to the stable doors.

An extraordinarily beautiful lady rushed from the manor to greet the officer on horseback. Her green silk dress flowed enticingly around her as she dropped into a proper curtsy once he stood upon the ground. Around her shoulders, she wore a delicate floral shawl that Laura envied.

The officer bowed to the lady, showing her the kind of respect Laura had always wished for herself. She did not really mean to spy, yet she could not break away from the scene before her. She listened as they entered the manor, their laughter echoing across the distance between the mansion and the stable, reminding her of the distance between her own station and that of those who resided in the expansive home.

Laura dreamed of being a lady, not because of the lovely clothing or the fine homes, but for the respect those women were given by others. The officer had shown proper respect to the

lovely woman without her ever having to admonish him for treating her badly. It was in stark contrast to the way Lord Gundry and even the vicar behaved toward Laura.

Laura turned to make certain Old Jack remained asleep and oblivious to his surroundings. She glanced over the entire stable to establish that she was truly alone and under no scrutiny. She did not want to be laughed at ever again.

Being certain she was by herself, Laura took a few moments to imitate the movements of the lady she had spied upon. In particular, she chose to practice a proper curtsy, as she had noticed her first attempt had been somewhat lacking in grace.

She faced Hermes and lowered herself into a curtsy for the sixth time, feeling this one was the perfect imitation of those done by the lady. She jumped and nearly took a tumble

when she heard a voice nearing her from behind. It was easily recognizable as that of Lord Ellis.

“Miss Pike, how have the lessons gone?” he asked as he came into view.

“They have gone well, my lord. Hermes has learned quickly. I do not think he will bite the hands that feed him any longer. I found he prefers a hand that is not reluctant to touch him. The fear of others translates to him becoming the master. I believe that is why only you have been able to ride him. You show no fear, thus you are his master.”

“That is very insightful and quite a lot of progress for one afternoon. I applaud you. I would also like you to meet my cousin, Miss Sophia Redman. She resides at the manor. Sophia, this astute young woman is Miss Laura Pike.”

The very lady she had been imitating came forward eagerly and took her hand in greeting.

“It is wonderful to meet you. I seldom see anyone close to my age at the manor. Owen is very protective of me,” Miss Sophia announced in a friendly tone.

Laura was slightly confused by her warmth. She acted as if they were peers, which eased the tension around her. She discovered an immediate liking for the lady.

Lord Ellis found the sleeping form of Old Jack and awakened him. The young ladies shared a laugh when the old man tried to pretend he had not been napping.

“I was watching the horse. Miss Pike shares

the same gift with horses that her father displayed. I simply did not wish to interrupt her work, so I made myself scarce,” he grumbled.

Sophia appeared delighted to share laughter with Laura. She grinned at her and proclaimed, “You must stay to tea! I cannot bear it if you leave without it. You have worked so diligently and deserve refreshment. I would welcome the company as I have been so lonely of late. Please, say yes!”

Laura stared down at her work clothes, smudged, wrinkled, and smelling of horses. She was completely embarrassed by her attire, especially when she compared it with the silk dress Sophia wore.

However, Sophia seemed so enthusiastic and eager, Laura was unable to turn the offer down without a better excuse than her clothes. She looked to the duke for support.

“I will join you if Lord Ellis does not mind. I doubt he wishes a stable hand to enter the manor in this condition.” She hoped he would deny her entry and save her from further embarrassment as she did not know the proper way to act at tea with her superiors.

Lord Ellis smiled broadly and replied, “I have no qualms about inviting you into the manor. Indeed, I would appreciate having another lovely lady in my home. By all means, join Sophia for tea.”

“Thank you for the kind offer, Miss Sophia. I will gladly join you,” Laura reluctantly agreed.

“Oh, do please drop the miss. I am just Sophia, the daughter of a merchant. May I call you Laura as I believe we will be fast friends?”

“I would like that. I could use a friend,” Laura replied with a blush.

A full week later, Laura again sat in the drawing room sharing tea with her friend Sophia. It had become a habit to do so after each lesson with Hermes. Most days the ladies laughed and talked of their childhoods, adventures, and dreams for the future.

This day was different. Laura struggled to display any joy. She was not talkative. In fact, she found herself frowning often, showing she was deeply concerned, almost frightened by something.

“Laura, you are not yourself. I am worried

there is a problem you have not spoken about. I hope you know by now that I am your friend, and you can confide in me. Please, allow me to help you.”

“I do not wish to burden you with my trouble. However, a letter arrived at our cottage which has brought me much grief. I have read what I can of it, but some words confound me. Will you read it and explain them to me? I have some idea as to the meaning and it scares me.”

Sophia took the letter and read through it. Her sweet smile disappeared and was replaced by a startled expression.

“Laura, this is a notice of eviction! Lord Gundry wants you and your father to vacate the property. He claims he has the right, due to the lack of upkeep on the structures such as the stable and the fences.”

Laura broke down in tears. The letter was exactly what she had feared.

“He has been looking for any excuse to be rid of us. I cannot suffer any more of his inappropriate advances so he threatens my father over every tiny thing he can find wrong. We do our best, but Father is crippled. Lord Gundry was aware of that when he rented the cottage to us. It was in worse shape at that time. I do not know what to do.”

“Well, I do.” Sophia left the room and returned with Lord Ellis.

Laura tried valiantly to hide her tear-stained face, though she knew it was impossible.

“Show me the letter,” the duke demanded between clenched teeth.

Laura obeyed with some reluctance, keeping her head turned away.

“This is preposterous! He cannot do this. The rent was paid in full as I promised. The fool has gone too far!” he exploded in outrage.

“Owen, you must give Laura shelter and aid her father. They cannot be treated so cruelly. I demand that you help. Laura has done so much for Hermes,” Sophia declared.

“I will have a few choice words with Gundry. Do not fret. All will be well. I will handle him.”

Lord Ellis stalked from the room and loudly ordered Hermes to be saddled immediately.

Forgetting her manners, Laura chased after him. She did not want him involved in her troubles. He had done more than enough to save them already.

“Do not go! This is not your issue. We will find a way to stop the eviction. I can do some repairs.”

“It is not repairs Lord Gundry wants. His behaviour makes it clear as day that his intentions towards you and your father are not honest. I cannot sit idly and allow this behaviour to continue. Your honour must be defended, and I will do so. Do not stop me. This is a necessity.”

Laura stood awestruck as he rode away. No man other than her father had ever spoken of her honour. Her heart gave a flutter. She

placed a hand over it, as if to hold Lord Ellis near.

Lord Ellis returned an hour later slightly dishevelled, yet grinning. He refused to relate the details of his confrontation with Lord Gundry but swore that the matter had been handled.

“In addition, I wish you to take the position of lady’s maid to Sophia. You will reside in the manor under my protection. Gundry will not reach you here.”

He did not give her a chance to protest. He walked away to change his rumpled clothing, leaving her with Sophia.

“Please say you will do as he says, Laura. I will enjoy your companionship. I want you to realize that Owen takes such good care of

those he likes.” The words were said with a grin of conspiracy.

A warmth came over Laura upon learning the duke liked her. She was delighted by the knowledge. She was discovering that Lord Ellis was not like the other eligible men of her acquaintance. She admired his character and his great kindness both to people and animals.

Laura was given Sunday as her day to do as she pleased. She chose to visit her father and see to his needs. She missed him dearly. She began the long walk down the lane only to be confronted by the duke.

“You must take a horse. The walk is a long and dusty one. A horse will get you to the cottage more quickly and leave you more time to spend with your father. I will not take no for an answer.”

Hesitating, Laura looked toward the paddock, where Hermes stood staring at them. As if reading her mind, Lord Ellis stated, "I owe you a ride on Hermes. By all means, take him. He is restless and in need of exercise. In fact, I fancy a ride as well. I will accompany you upon another of my stallions."

More comfortable with him than ever before, Laura teased, "Do you fear your own horse? Do you worry he will not behave properly?"

"I know better than that, Miss Pike. You have tamed him to my satisfaction. I trust you more than most. Your opinion matters and you have sworn he will behave from here on in. It is your safety I am concerned over."

Laura stood back and revelled in the compliment as he saddled Hermes and a large black stallion with a white stripe down its face.

As a gentleman should, he helped her mount, and they rode away side by side.

“You handle Hermes quite well. He appears to be smitten with you still. I have always felt he has been an exceptional judge of beauty and character. He has now proven it,” the duke professed.

Laura blushed as she daringly replied, “He proved his good judgment to me the first time I met him. He has always seemed to trust you.”

“Ah, but I am not a beautiful lady. I fear he has lost his heart to you.”

“He cannot for he adores his master. He has

chosen well in who he finds trustworthy,” Laura flirtatiously answered.

“You have a rare spirit that is kind and gentle, despite harsh circumstances. You do not break under adversity. Such strong will serves you well and reflects well on your father.”

Laura felt her heart leap at his words. It was amazing to be complimented on her character rather than her beauty. She cherished the words even though she was becoming aware of his attraction to her.

The attraction was mutual. It had a lot to do with his fine character and the way he chose to ignore the differences in their stations. He rose higher in her estimation on each encounter, this one included. She also felt drawn to his handsomeness. Any lady in her right mind would admire his beauty, inside and out.

Then, too, his restraint from pushing his attraction upon her was a true reflection of his character. It was rare in her experience and made him different among his kind.

Chapter 8

Later that week, Owen and Charles stood side by side, hanging their equipment up after a long ride. It was a brisk afternoon for spring, yet the perfect day for them to take a trot to the cliffside. It was easy to tell that the season was due to change any time, and that made Owen happy. He much enjoyed the London weather especially at summertime, it made for great outdoor events and got everyone out of their stuffy home.

“So, you never told me,” Charles began as he took his riding gloves off, “how you took care of Gundry the other day.” He laced the bridle up to the horn that was on the wall.

“Nor did I feel it was important,” Owen said to him teasingly.

It was something that the pair of them did often, speak to one another with sarcasm and playful banter. It had been the case since they were younger lads.

“I suppose, if you do not care to tell me.” Charles pretended to pout. “Although I am your closest confidant and all. I though we told each other everything,” he said with a smirk.

Lady Ellis had always likened the pair to a set of old spinsters who liked to prattle on about everything and nothing all at once. Owen liked that about Charles; he could be himself around the other man, and Owen felt that everyone, duke or otherwise needed that.

It didn't matter at all that Charles was of lower station than he, although others had noted it.

“If you really must know, I paid off all of Harry Pike’s debts and paid for repairs to the cottage.” Owen turned to walk out of the stables. “The landlord was rather unreasonable with some of his requests, but I could tell the man was untrustworthy when handling deals with Laura... I couldn’t take those chances anymore, for both Laura’s and Harry’s sake. He also wouldn’t budge on the rent and will still be requiring it on the monthly.”

“Ah,” Charles exhaled as they walked back towards the manor. Just before they arrived, Charles took Owen by the arm and stopped him. “As your friend, I am asking this of you not to anger you, but because I worry about your well-being.”

“Ask away,” Owen said, as he looked down at Charles’ hand still on his shoulder.

Charles let his hand fall and the pair stood there for a moment while Owen looked back and forth between the stable and the manor to be sure they didn't have an audience.

"I was wondering if that may give Laura the wrong impression of you and your intentions," Charles said softly. "I don't mean to sound like the others who are worried over station, heaven knows you and I have no place being friends, but you are promised to another and are galivanting with her."

Owen scoffed as he grumbled under his breath. He honestly knew where his friend was coming from but didn't want to think about it too much.

"You know as well as I that I have been careful not to talk of such things with the young lady." Owen smiled at his friend, then looked back to the stables to make sure Laura

hadn't somehow popped around the corner.

"You don't have to talk of them Owen," Charles said. "It's clear to see, it's apparent by the looks you both exchange and how you talk to one another, what is really on your mind."

"And what is that?" Owen asked. He didn't look at his friend with anger or vexation, no... he was more intrigued by the current topic of conversation.

"Love," replied Charles. "And I have every reason to believe that it's mutual between the pair of you. Am I right by assuming so, at least on your part?"

"Perhaps," Owen said, but then he looked down in guilt. He felt bad, like a cad, even.

If it was obvious to Charles that he had feelings for Laura, then it was likely just as obvious to Laura herself or his mother, Lady Ellis.

“You know what you’re going to have to do, my friend. Your mother would not have you married to a stable girl; Lady Ellis would rather have your father roll in his grave,” Charles said. “You are promised to another. Just as Sophia and I will never be together for those very same reasons.”

Owen knew Charles was right and reluctantly agreed that he would speak to Laura and reveal his engagement. No matter how much he knew it was going to hurt the both of them, it was important to be truthful. There was no need to lead her along as if they had a chance, though he longed to have her at his side always.

She was beautiful and loved horses as much as he... it would be the perfect union, albeit taboo. He shook his head to release the thoughts.

He thought of her raven hair and the way she rode a horse, even the way she had tamed and charmed Hermes. She was everything he had ever wanted in a woman, even before he knew he wanted one, and now he was going to have to discuss with her that there was no chance of them ever being together.

Once Owen and Charles were finished with their conversation, they walked into the manor ready to have a small snack before it would be time for the evening meal. The kitchen staff had grown rather fond of the pair and often snuck them delicacies that they wouldn't offer to others but at mealtimes or during tea.

Later that evening, after the evening meal,

Owen walked back out to the stable and readied Hermes. He got atop his mount and rode out into the cool evening air. He needed to think before he approached Laura, but it looked to him like that time might be sooner than later.

In the distance, Laura was sitting atop Patience, dressed in a beautiful riding habit. The crimson jacket she wore was stunning as it draped over her white habit shirt and black trimmed skirt, and her hair was finely pinned under her riding hat. Sophia had rather won in the dressing Laura department, though Owen never thought anything wrong with her old attire.

He had not thought her unpretty or undesirable in her peasant frock, nor would he ever be able to bring himself to think poorly of her due to it, but he didn't mind this, either.

“Might we go for a ride?” Owen asked her as

he sidled up next to her.

“We might,” she said as she bowed her head slightly. “I apologise for this hideous getup; Sophia insisted that I had new clothes befitting my new situation. Truth be told, I don’t think it’s all that bad, I just feel a little...” She paused as Owen looked at her.

“Out of place?” he asked.

“How’d you know?” she asked.

“I know the feeling from time to time,” Owen said to her as they began to move into the grazing pasture and towards the ocean.

Once they had gotten to the beach and the sun was nearly set in the sky, Owen halted his

horse and turned to face Laura. He then got off the beast and tied him to a post that was sticking up from the sand. He watched as Laura did the same and they began to walk down the beach a little.

“I need to talk to you about something.” Owen turned to her and they both stopped.

“Oh?” she asked as she looked up at him through her lashes.

“I hate to be the one informing you of this, and believe me, I wouldn’t have it this way if I had a choice, but due to my status, and my mother’s fear that she will not have a grandson to carry on the Ellis name, my marriage has been arranged and will soon be carried out,” Owen blabbed on, then stopped and looked down in disappointment. “I thought it only right that I let you know.”

Laura looked up at him, troubled, and then acceptance filled her eyes. She looked like she was about to cry, but Owen had been around her enough to know that tears were something Laura often kept hidden from him, or at least she tried.

“Oh,” was all she said again, and Owen thought that his heart was about to crumble.

“Listen to me,” he said as he stepped closer to her and made sure he had her full attention. “I admit that I do have feelings for you, but I can’t and won’t act on those feelings because I have been promised to a woman that I don’t even know yet. That, and I respect you too much.”

“Thank you for letting me know,” Laura said. “I accept the fact that you have obligations as a duke. I don’t belong with you... the lucky woman that will soon be Lady Ellis does. I

wish you and her both all the happiness in the world.”

“Thank you,” Owen said, but then he had to restrain himself from saying too much, though he wanted to say more, so much more. “I, however, want to make it clear, though, that you and your father will always be under my protection, and that is never going to change.”

Laura stood there for a moment as Owen didn’t know what else to say. He looked on as he saw a real tear fall down her ivory face. His heart was breaking for her, and for him.

Then, something he didn’t expect happened. She turned, mounted her horse, and rode away, leaving him and Hermes alone on the beach.

He rode home in solemn silence. His heart

throbbed with forlorn distress. That was the worst thing he had had to do since burying his father.

He was a man, however, and he needed to pull himself together.

Once he got back, he didn't take the time to put Hermes away, since Laura was in the stable with Patience. He instead gave him to Old Jack to handle and headed inside.

"My lord," Mildred, his mother's chambermaid, came looking for him.

"Yes, Mildred, what is it?" he asked hoping everything was all right with his mother.

"Lady Phoebe will see you in the study right

away,” Mildred said, before curtsying and going back in the direction she had come.

Owen walked towards the study wondering what it was that his mother wanted of him.

“Son, do come in,” she said, once she saw him standing outside the double doors.

She motioned for him with her hand fan and then patted the seat next to her. Owen walked in and, rather than sit next to her, he took the seat across from her. He liked looking into her eyes instead of feeling like he was a little boy again, forced to be attached to her skirts.

“Yes, Mother?” he asked her, wanting to get to the point.

“I wanted to speak to you about Laura, dear,” she said to him, as she sat straight in her high-backed chair.

Her dress was a long-sleeved number made of thick material. Owen had noticed that she had been dressing warmer later in the year than she used to and worried about her health.

“What of Laura?” he finally asked her.

“I just felt I needed to remind you of her status is all,” Lady Phoebe stated.

“Mother, your snobbery appals me.”

“There is nothing wrong with being a snob, son, it keeps the world going in the right direction... People should know their place,

and know that those of their status should not mix with say a lord or a lady, certainly not a duke or duchess.”

Owen got to his feet and headed towards the door. He was done with the conversation and disgusted by it, as well. He was trying to think of something to say that would anger his mother but not get him in too much trouble. He wasn't a vindictive or petty person, he just wanted to make her realise.

“The evening meal will be soon. Mother, and Sophia has invited Laura to join us. I would suggest we accept her as family, because my cousin insists on treating her as such.”

Owen walked out before his mother could say anything else, but he knew that displeased Lady Ellis, who had been intolerable with Sophia's attachment to the girl. She had been teaching Laura how to read, how to dress, play the piano, even—but to treat her like a

member of the family, he knew his mother would not allow that.

That night before the evening meal, Lady Ellis leaned over to her son while keeping an eye on Laura.

“I wasn’t done speaking with you earlier. How dare you leave my company without permission,” she said to him, but he continued to look away. “I have noticed yours and Laura’s growing affection towards one another.”

“I assure you, Mother,” Owen said, leaning over to his mother’s ear, “I will marry for status, not love. I told you I would, so you have my word. Laura and any affection you think I might have towards her is no concern of yours any longer. What is he doing here, Mother?” Owen said all in the same breath at seeing the vicar walk in and join them at their table.

“I invited him,” Lady Ellis said. “After the aid he gave you, I thought it only polite.”

Owen shook his head at his mother as he leaned back up in his chair and began enjoying the first course. Laura was awkward as she noted Sophia’s table manners and began to imitate them.

Eventually, she relaxed gradually and contributed to the conversation brilliantly.

“Lovely meal, Lady Ellis,” Laura said. “Do you plan them yourself?”

“I do,” Lady Ellis said. “Of course, it is the staff that executes my wishes so elegantly, however I do meal plan with the head chef

each Sunday.”

“How nice,” Laura said as she looked over towards Owen and exchanged a glance with him.

Owen winked back, but then was sure that Lady Ellis had noticed as well as the vicar. Apart from that, the evening was going nicely until the vicar spoke up for the first time.

“Do tell me, Duke Owen. How go the wedding arrangements?”

Owen looked on in horror as the question quickly dampened the mood, but it was Lady Ellis who spoke first, and gaily, in fact, about the preparations.

“Lady Marjorie Fielding cannot wait to visit this coming week. We wish to see the pair interact before the Season starts in London,” Lady Ellis said, looking Laura in the eye the whole time. “She is Owen’s intended, and my does she have a list of accomplishments a mile long.”

“Mother, might we not talk about this at the table?” Owen said upon seeing Laura looking ill.

“Might I be excused?” Laura asked as she got up and ran from the table without being properly excused.

Sophia followed after her, but Owen remained, angered by his mother’s insensitivity.

The next day, Owen walked into the stables.

He wasn't surprised to see Laura there, though he was shocked to see that she was wearing her old dress.

"Oh, Owen," she said as she spun around and saw him watching her. "I've been neglecting my duties while putting on airs. I thought it was time to bring the old me back out for a change."

"You know you don't have to be like that," Owen said.

"Like what?" she asked while she put her hand on her hip.

"Like," he said, but then he paused.

"What... poor?" she said.

“I’m sorry,” Owen said, immediately feeling bad for what had been implied.

“If you must know the truth,” Laura said, “it didn’t really hurt that you were to be married to someone else until...” She looked down, and he lifted her chin with a single finger.

“Until what?” Owen questioned.

“Until that someone else had a name,” she said as she looked down again.

“I apologise for not having told you the entire truth about my marriage sooner,” he explained unhappily. “I feel bad that I was not so forthcoming at first. I have duties to perform, though my heart is not in it.”

“I understand,” Laura said as she stepped back a little farther away from him.

“You may say that, but really, you don’t understand. How could you?”

“What do you mean?” Laura asked him as he took a step closer, closing the gap again.

“Laura, I am in love with you,” Owen blurted out. “And, given the chance, it would be you that I would marry.”

“Stop, you have to stop,” Laura demanded as a whole flood of tears began to stream from her eyes. “You are breaking my heart into pieces, and I need you to just,” she seemed to realise that she was yelling, and whispered, “stop!”

Laura turned around and began to run into the house in tears, Owen just inches behind her. As they both flew through the door, Laura ran straight into Lady Ellis.

“Well, I can only guess from the state of you both what has happened here,” Lady Ellis said. “Now, I insist upon a private conversation with Laura... now, please.”

Laura nodded and looked over her shoulder as she followed Lady Ellis into the study. Owen knew she was scared.

He thought better than to do the next thing that he was going to do, but he caved as he pressed his ear to the door.

“I will have you know,” Lady Ellis began, “I don’t know who you think you are, but I will not have you rise above your station by thinking you can marry my one and only son.”

Owen could hear that Laura was crying and his heart began to break for her. He himself knew how intimidating his mother could be.

“I wouldn’t entertain the notion,” Laura assured her.

“Once Owen meets his intended, he’ll forget about you,” Lady Ellis said, and it took everything within him not to barge in. “And it will be for the best,” she finished.

“May I be excused?” Laura asked and Owen took off outside before either of the ladies could see him.

Moments later, as he hid behind a bush, he saw Laura running back to the stable. He watched as she hid in Hermes' stall, Hermes nuzzling her hair as she cried.

“I never wanted to fall in love with any man, Hermes,” Owen could hear her say. “And now, it’s too late.”

Chapter 9

A week later and Lady Marjorie Fielding had arrived—and with her was an entire entourage of servants, including a dresser and lady's maids. At first, everyone who laid eyes on her thought her to be a beauty, some might have argued that her beauty surpassed most.

She was wearing a dress suitable for travel; it was black and white and drew in at the waist. Her hair was set down her neck in ringlets of black and dark brown. A white hat adorned with flowers of red and white was pinned perfectly on top of her curls.

Her face was pale and her lips full, but her greatest feature was her figure. Little did anyone know that her features were the best qualities about her.

She was overly aggressive with her staff, but they seemed to do exactly what they were told to do. She liked it that way. That simply wasn't how Blackmore Manor was run, but if Lady Marjorie had anything to do with it... it would be, soon enough.

Owen hadn't been there for the arrival, which he had arranged intentionally. He much preferred to be the one to make an entrance. Not in a conceited way, but Owen liked to be able to decide when he would be seen.

It was clear to everyone at the manor that she was haughty and entitled and had little concern for anyone without a title. The way she quickly began commanding the servants of the manor was befitting of a spoiled woman, not the lady that she was.

The lady was sitting, waiting for Owen to

arrive when Sophia came into the room and sat near her. The one thing that Lady Marjorie didn't know about Sophia was that she was perhaps the most kind and pure soul there was.

“Welcome to the manor,” Sophia said to her with a curtsy as the other lady was getting settled in the sitting room. “I hope that we can be great friends, there aren't many other women around here my age.”

“Name, please... and title,” Marjorie asked as she held an odd expression on her face.

Sophia laughed a little as she knew that they weren't cut from the same cloth, but she wanted to take a chance on the friendship, particularly since they were going to eventually be living under the same roof.

“Oh, where are my manners? Do excuse my lack of pleasantries, but unfortunately, you may call me Sophia. While I am the duke’s cousin, I come from the other side of the family—my mother a lady, my father a merchant.”

Marjorie smiled politely and then ignored the girl altogether. She apparently couldn’t take the chance of speaking to someone of a lower status than her, Sophia assumed.

Just then, as they waited on Owen’s return, Charles came in and sat across from Sophia. He looked at her longingly and Lady Marjorie took note.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” he said, as he and Sophia finished exchanging a glance. “It is lovely to make your acquaintance,” he said as he held his hand out toward Lady Marjorie. “I am Colonel Charles Godwin of the military in these parts. You must be,” he began to address

Marjorie, but was cut off.

“You must be some sort of sapskull if you think you have any place addressing a lady,” Marjorie said as she scoffed in the colonel’s direction.

She looked at his hand and smiled as she put his in hers, a sudden change in demeanour while being around someone more respected in title than Sophia. Charles saw that Sophia was upset, but he kissed the top of the lady’s hand nonetheless, giving a slight bow.

“Do excuse me,” Charles said, as he stood to his full height and walked back into the other room. “I think I will wait for Owen in there,” he added as he left the room, clearly hoping that gave Sophia a reason to leave the company of the lady if she so chose.

“Huh,” the lady huffed, most likely due to Charle’s prompt exit.

“Excuse me, miss,” one of the lady’s maids of the manor said as she scooted closer to Lady Marjorie Fielding. “Excuse me, my lady, I thought I would give you a bit of knowledge ahead of time. That there was Duke Owen Ellis’ best friend and closest confidant—it might be an idea to get in his good graces.”

“You must be a clot if you think you have the right to address me in any way, unless it is to dress me,” Lady Marjorie Fielding said. “Now, go back to your menial tasks and leave the conversing to those that matter. I highly doubt the duke makes company with colonels.”

The maid was sent off in tears, and it took all that Sophia had in her not to say anything to Lady Marjorie Fielding or go after the maid... Rather, she went to join Charles and left the lady and her escort sitting alone.

Sophia knew Owen would not like this one, and if he was right about Lady Ellis' wishes, this would be the only one. He would be forced to marry the shrew, and Sophia winced inside at the notion.

"I do worry for him now that we have met her," Sophia said to Charles in hushed tones.

"It isn't our place to show her true nature," Charles said. "Owen will learn on his own terms."

"If you say so," Sophia said as she took a seat.

"I do say so," Charles said, but then his nose wrinkled. "Though I don't like her any more than you do."

“Good,” Sophia said with a face that matched Charles’ scowl.

Throughout the day, nearly everyone in the house was insulted in one way or another by Lady Marjorie. She had the most unpleasant attitude, and by the time it was time for Owen to return, the entire household was avoiding her, and had left her sitting in the study with Lady Phoebe.

Lady Ellis, however, had not yet witnessed the charm and wit of Lady Marjorie, nor did any of the members of the house think she would until Lady Ellis got to know her better. Sophia, Charles, and about everyone else involved hoped that day would come and Lady Ellis would make her leave.

If day one was this bad, they could only

imagine a lifetime with her around.

A rustling came from outside the study as Owen went inside. He was wearing his riding coat and tall black riding boots. He had gotten rid of his gloves and hat, though he still looked the part of a noble rider.

“Mother, has our guest arrived?” Owen said, as he walked into the study, but then he paused at seeing her sitting there with Lady Ellis. “Oh, do mind my manners, I am Owen Ellis, Duke of Blackmore. Pleased to make your acquaintance, my lady.”

“Hello, your grace, I am Lady Marjorie Fielding,” she said, and her attitude changed immediately. Whose wouldn’t, after meeting the handsome duke?

“Would you like a tour of the manor?” Owen

offered the lady with a gallant smile.

“I would very much like that,” Lady Marjorie said. “Where shall we start our tour?”

“My favourite place, of course,” he said to her.

“Oh, where might that be?” she asked. “The gardens? The courtyard? Or might it be the ballroom or towers?” She had an overbearing amount of charm in her words.

“No, I thought we might start in the stables.”

“The stables, why on earth should we start there?” Lady Marjorie declared.

“Because, as I said before, we shall start with my favourite place, and that is the stables with all the horses.” He smiled at her. “You will love Old Jack the stable hand,” he added. “He’s been like a father to me.”

“Oh, fun,” Lady Marjorie said as she twisted her lips in displeasure. “Shall we go see the beasts?” She offered her arm to him, and he took it. “And Old... Jack,” she said with disgust.

Owen tried not to notice the remark or the look on her face as he took her arm and led her out.

“This is my prize stock, and this here is Hermes,” he said, once they had reached the stall Hermes was in.

“Goodness, my, isn’t he... interesting?” Lady

Marjorie remarked. "But why would you have something so disgusting be your favourite feature of this tour? And why him, in particular?"

"He's my friend," Owen added.

"Friends with horses, a father figure in a stable hand, have I misjudged you?" she said with a turned-up nose.

"Speaking of stable hand," Owen said upon seeing Old Jack stumble his way. "This here is Old Jack; he taught me everything I know about horses from when I was a boy."

"Nice to meet you," the lady said as she looked from side to side. "Were you sleeping in here?" she asked, seeing the old sack blanket on a pile of hay in the corner of the stable.

“Old Jack is, well, old,” Owen teased. “He likes to nap from time to time.”

“Well, it was nice meeting you, my lady, and to see you again, Owen, but I need to be continuing my work,” Old Jack said to them.

“Or continue your nap, you mean?” Owen teased the old man.

As he and Lady Marjorie walked on down to another stall, she leaned over to him and whispered, “Don’t you think it’s high time that old man be put out to pasture?”

“You’ll understand once you have been here long enough; I am not like any duke you have ever met,” Owen said.

He hated that she seemed completely dismissive of his prized horses, as if they were only property—and even more than that, he didn't like her behaviour towards Old Jack.

“This here is Patience,” Owen said, coming closer to Laura's horse. “She belongs to Miss Laura. I imagine you will meet her soon enough, she's across the way working with one of our other mares.” He smiled, but tried not to show too much of a reaction towards her.

“Oh, good heavens,” Lady Marjorie said as she pinched her nose with a gloved hand. “It stinks in here,” she said as she glanced over at Laura, who was brushing down a mare. Lady Marjorie made a face at seeing a woman doing hard labour.

Owen could tell Laura had ignored the

woman.

“I will leave meeting the rest of the help to another day. Might we go through a tour of the gardens next?” Marjorie asked Owen. “Your mother, Lady Ellis,” she corrected herself, “she tells me that it’s beautiful there this time of year.”

“If that’s what you would like to do,” Owen said, glancing back over his shoulder at Laura.

He felt horrible showing his bride-to-be around with her there, but she had every bit the right to be there that Lady Marjorie did.

Later that day, after showing Lady Marjorie the stables, gardens, towers, and pretty much all of the manor, Owen was excited to be going out with Charles on a ride. It was his favourite thing to do, after all, and the small

ride he had had that morning didn't compare to the one he would go on with his friend.

Plus, after the day he'd had, he needed to partake in decent conversation with someone who wasn't going to turn their nose up at everything he liked. He knew there were only three people in the manor that applied to, and neither Sophia nor Laura were proper choices for what he needed to say.

They trotted rather quickly before coming to a stop at the edge of the cliff they jokingly called the place where they felt free. The pair had gone there as lads with Old Jack many times. It was sort of a tradition at this point, and Owen was nothing if not a traditional man... well, at least regarding the traditions that he liked.

"So, what do you think of Lady Marjorie?" Owen asked Charles as they slowed their trot down, looking over the cliff by the ocean.

“You don’t want my opinion.” Charles turned his nose up a little, but he wanted to make sure his friend did not see the action.

“If I didn’t want to know what you thought, Charles, I wouldn’t have asked,” Owen said, as he brought Hermes to a complete stop.

“Well,” Charles said, clearly gathering his thoughts before he began. “Let’s just say that I have my doubts about your upcoming union with Lady Marjorie. I don’t see you both being a good enough fit to make it work.”

“Go on.” Owen prodded for his friend to continue.

“Owen, this morning, upon her entrance and

the few hours that followed, she alienated every servant in the household before you entered the manor. And let me tell you, I can deal with her pompous snobbery towards me,” Charles spewed, “but Sophia is the sweetest person I know and is now avoiding Lady Marjorie after attempting to make friends with her, only to be ignored because of her status.”

“She did that?” Owen asked in shock. “She did make a few comments earlier in the day, but she seemed to be trying a little. I did notice the servants’ responses to her, and that Sophia and you were both missing for the biggest part of the day. That, and I couldn’t stand her distaste for the horses, Old Jack, or Laura, which she all but refused to meet.”

“You thought Laura would want to meet the woman you’re going to marry?” Charles asked in shock.

“I thought it only right to allow them to meet.

To keep one from the other would only look more suspicious than it should, do you not think?" Owen looked at the rolling waters and then back to Charles every now and again as he spoke.

"Perhaps," Charles answered. "However, I would be lying if I told you that I wasn't distressed," he said. "I don't like that Sophia is unhappy and due to that, I must argue strongly against Lady Marjorie staying at the manor. Sophia has not a single place to go that is suitable for her, she would be cast into a home for spinsters otherwise."

"You worry only because you love Sophia," Owen teased Charles for a moment before becoming more serious. "Well, I will be careful and pay attention to her actions. Do let me know if she is mean to anyone else, will you?" he asked. "Do let Sophia know that she is to report to either of us or my mother should the lady say anything further about her status."

“You mean, mean to Laura?” Charles asked teasingly.

“I mean, mean to anyone,” Owen said. “Most of all you, Sophia, Laura, Old Jack, or my mother. Not a soul deserves her dislike, but particularly the five of you. You are my family, Charles.”

The two took off for the rest of their ride. The rest of the trip was done in silence for the most part. Not because they didn't have anything else to say, but they were both thinking about the choices that needed to be made.

Later that evening, before the evening meal, Lady Ellis cornered Owen to let him know that the vicar would be joining them again.

“Oh, and your little friend Laura was invited, as well, I would love for her to get to meet Lady Marjorie, too,” Lady Phoebe said with a mischievous smile.

“Whatever suits your fancy, Mother,” Owen said with a scowl as he headed to the evening meal.

Owen walked in to see the vicar and Laura already sitting at the table, as well as Charles, Sophia, and Lady Marjorie.

“Why don’t you sit closer to me?” the vicar said as he leaned in closer to Laura.

“Never,” she said to him. Owen had to fight the urge to get involved, but he knew that Laura could take care of him.

The guests were all likely there to see Lady Marjorie shine. Owen knew his mother was trying to prove a point to him by showing the difference between Laura and Lady Marjorie, but he wasn't having it.

"What is the help doing sitting at the table with us?" Lady Marjorie asked with disgust.

"If you will excuse me, I will remedy that," Laura said as she got to her feet. "Nice to meet you, Lady Marjorie, although it wasn't a proper meeting. And, for your information, I am no one's help."

Laura stormed out of the room, followed shortly by the vicar. Owen sat there for as long as he could, then he got up too, followed by Lady Marjorie, who stood in the shadows.

Owen found Laura and the Vicar standing by the stables. A second's worth of something swam in his stomach before he realized that the vicar was trying to take advantage of Laura. He stood against her, trying over and over again to take her hand.

She screamed for him to stop many times over, yet the man wouldn't stop. Owen ran up to the pair and tried not to be too angry, he didn't know what he would do if he got that mad.

"The lady is asking you to leave her alone, Vicar. You will no longer be allowed here at the manor, per my request," Owen said. "You may see yourself off."

Owen pointed in the direction of the main way to leave the property and the vicar did as he was told, but not without a few last words.

“That there is no lady. Lady Marjorie is a lady, and you will see your house ruined by having feelings for the help,” he said as he got in his wagon and took off before Owen could say or do anything to him.

“He’s wrong you know,” Owen said as she spun around to face Laura. He wished to dry the tears in her eyes. “You have always been a lady to me.”

What neither Owen nor Laura knew was that Lady Marjorie was watching from a distance and had seen the whole exchange. She was more than insulted.

Right then and there, Owen worried, Lady Marjorie had taken notice of Laura as her competition.

Chapter 10

The very next day, Laura was in the stable brushing Hermes. Her heart skipped a beat with every stroke as she recalled Owen saving her the night before, though she knew he had been promised to Lady Marjorie.

That didn't bother her as much as the fact that she had experienced what kind of person Lady Marjorie could be. She had heard around the manor the things that she had said and done, but she had tried not to believe it—until the evening meal had come.

She didn't know what to do or think and hated that more than anything. Laura had always been a woman of decision and action; she had never been one to rest on her haunches and take what had been given her.

She had been willing to sell her prized horse for rent—how resilient would a person have to be to be willing to do that?

As Laura finished doing her tasks for the morning, she put the brush away, spun around, and jumped in the air. She hadn't heard Lady Marjorie entering the stall where she stood. Truth be told, she was shocked that the woman was there. It was one of those moments that Laura didn't know if she should stay or hop on a horse and trot away.

“I would back up if I were you,” Laura finally said with a look of concern on her face as she glanced back and forth between Hermes and Lady Marjorie.

“Excuse me?” the woman asked with a hand to her chest like she had been shot. “Who do you think you are—”

“Hermes isn’t kind to strangers and we wouldn’t want to see you get bit,” Laura said, adopting a sarcastic tone while interrupting what the lady was going to say.

“Can you please meet me at the front of the stables, so we don’t have to all smell like you?” Lady Marjorie asked her as she made her way back to the front of the building. “Do hurry,” she added to Laura’s frustration.

Laura finished up doing what she had been doing and made sure all the horses had food, had been brushed, and were properly stalled to ensure they didn’t get out. She smiled at Old Jack as he sat on a stool over in the corner, his head tipped down a bit... She knew the old man was sleeping again. That was pretty much all he did these days, but she didn’t mind it at all.

A few moments later, Laura joined her there. She had no idea why the woman was there to talk to her—perhaps she was wanting to apologise, but by the insult about her smell, Laura didn't think so.

She stood and looked at the lady, not knowing exactly how to act. She wanted to tell her of her anger for treating her the way she had, but she felt it best to wait and see what Lady Marjorie had to say to her.

“Can I help you?” she finally asked Lady Marjorie as she dusted her hands on her skirt.

“Yes.” Lady Marjorie swatted a fly with a gloved hand. “I'm here to say I'm sorry about last night. I didn't realise how dear you are to this family, and I thought we might start over as friends. I would have never likened you to the help if I knew.” She looked Laura over, clearly judging her attire and state of disarray.

“If I knew you were Miss Sophia’s confidant and companion, that is. It’s simply that I see you out here more than with her.”

“You want to be my friend?” Laura asked, dumbfounded.

“Indeed,” the lady said, as she swatted at another fly.

Laura was convinced they were invisible flies or weren’t there at all. She thought to say something about what Sophia had told her happened the other morning, but thought better of that, as well. If the lady truly wanted to be her friend, that would be a way to ruin it and quick.

“All right,” Laura said. “I will be your friend,” she finished reluctantly.

“Wonderful, then,” Lady Marjorie said as she took Laura’s hand and dragged her with her to the gardens, where tea had been set for two. “As a peace offering,” she said as she motioned to the two chairs. “Sit.” She smiled, but Laura could nearly feel the devil behind the lady’s eyes.

“What about Sophia?” Laura asked.

“What about her?” Lady Marjorie said, and Laura was sure she could detect a tone in the lady’s voice.

“Well, she might like to join us, since she and I are friends as you so astutely noted,” Laura said as she sat.

She noticed that Lady Marjorie remained

standing, which felt odd to her. She wanted to ask the woman to be seated too, but other than having tea with Sophia, who had never treated her like the help, she hadn't sat with a lady to take tea... ever.

“Ah, well, I think she and the colonel are out doing something.” Lady Marjorie gave another dismissive swat of her hand in the air. “Now that you have sat down, let's talk.”

“Very well,” Laura said. “What do you want to chat about?” she asked, still feeling uncomfortable about the way the lady was acting.

She thought perhaps she had walked into the lion's den by accepting a friendship with Lady Marjorie, and she knew it would make things even worse between her and Owen. Laura shook her head a little as she looked across the gardens and saw Owen and Charles practising archery in the courtyard in the distance.

She wondered if Owen had seen her there with the lady, and instead of fretting over it, Laura turned her attention back to the prattling Marjorie.

“You, silly—your likes, dislikes, who you like or love, and where you came from,” Lady Marjorie ranted. “Those are the things I want to talk to you about... That’s what friends talk about, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Sure, I suppose,” Laura said. “Where should I start?”

“Perhaps at the beginning.” Lady Marjorie took her seat and sat on the edge of the chair. “As you know I have been promised to Lord Ellis to wed, so since you know that about me, I would like to know if you fancy someone here or elsewhere, or are you planning on

wedding sometime soon?”

“I don’t have feelings for anyone, here or anywhere.” Laura lied, thinking it was the better answer. “I don’t fancy talking over if I will wed or not, I don’t feel that is relevant at this time. I do have a father, but other than that, my heart belongs to Patience... my heart.”

“Good, good,” Lady Marjorie said. “That’s so good to hear.”

“Why good?” Laura asked quietly, feeling there was going to be more to this than she wanted there to be.

“I just thought that you and the vicar would make a right nice match,” Lady Marjorie said. “A match made in heaven, in fact. Have you thought about the vicar as an option to wed?”

Laura took a moment before saying anything. She wondered if the lady knew more than she thought she did. Perhaps the vicar had spoken to her, or maybe she had misconstrued activities between him and Laura the previous night. Maybe Owen had told her about the vicar trying to take her hand? Either way, Laura was appalled.

“The vicar? But he is a vile and disgusting and
—”

“Tut, tut, tut,” Lady Marjorie scolded her as she wagged a thin gloved finger just inches in front of Laura’s face. “That kind of talk is shameful,” she said. “The vicar is a man of God, for shame.”

“How so?” Laura asked, as she was truly confused by the lady’s words.

“You are lucky to have the vicar interested in you. He is the vicar, after all,” Lady Marjorie said with a smile. “He could give you nice things, make you a holy woman of God.”

“And he would have me as his slave. He would have me bear his children and be barefoot and with child all my days. The vicar is not a choice for me,” Laura said, insulted by Lady Marjorie’s words. “He is not now, nor will he ever be. I apologise that your attempt at matchmaking is being foiled, but I know the vicar far better than you.”

“Ah,” Lady Marjorie said with a tone of disdain. Laura could tell she was angered, but had no clue as to why. “If not the vicar, then perhaps another man would be suitable. Perhaps you could be resigned to marry another just to keep the vicar away, even... Ah yes, I know the perfect man for you,” Lady Marjorie said as she began to motion at a man

standing in the distance.

She got to her feet and the man began coming their way. He was dressed in a carriage driver's suit—one that Laura had seen on many occasion in the stables.

“Who is that?” Laura asked in bewilderment.
“Your driver?”

“That’s Jackson, my coachman. He is looking for a wife,” Lady Marjorie said as she continued to motion to him to come quicker. “He is rather well-off financially for being a peasant. He would make you a nice match, indeed.”

Marjorie called the man over then moved over to give her seat to him. She then fluttered off into the distance as the man looked at her, as uncomfortable as Laura was, and the two were

left alone.

Neither spoke for the longest time as they stared at the tea that was gaining a chilly edge quickly. The server of the tea stood idly by as she didn't know what to do, as well. Laura wanted to get up and run back to the stables, but thought that entirely too rude, so she stayed.

She was fuming as she thought of what Lady Marjorie had done. She had done it on purpose, under the guise of friendship, and Laura admonished herself for being so foolish.

“Just so you know, um,” the man began to speak, “this wasn't my plan,” he admitted. “The lady told me I should get to know you so that you might be occupied and out of her way.”

Somehow, Laura wasn't angered by his words; she began to chuckle. She could have guessed what the man had said, but since he had said it, it struck Laura as funny.

"Well," Laura said. "This wasn't my plan, either. I apologise that the lady has wasted your time as I am certain she has done many times before."

"She has, indeed," the man said with a laugh of his own. "I call her Lady Needy more often than not—of course, never where she can hear me."

The pair shared a hearty laugh at both of their expenses at the exact moment that Owen was walking through the garden on the way to the shed where the archery equipment was stored. Laura saw him coming, and he looked jealous to her. That wasn't at all what she wanted.

“Do excuse me,” she said to the man and felt horrible for never catching his name or introducing herself.

Laura ran towards the storage barn to talk to Owen; she had to tell him that was nothing, it meant nothing. She didn’t know why she should care about his feelings when he had hurt hers, but even in hurting hers, he was so kind while doing it.

After nearly an hour of searching for Owen, she realised she had lost his trail. The one hope she had to talk to him was when they would take the horses out on a run the following day.

The next day, Owen and Laura agreed on going on a ride together with the excuse that they were exercising the horses. Truth be told, that was exactly what they were doing, but it felt odd as they walked their horses off the

property.

Once they had gotten far enough out of the view of the manor, Laura needed to say a few things to Owen to have her peace.

“About yesterday,” Laura began to say but didn’t know how to continue as she watched Owen riding atop of Hermes.

“You were trying to make me jealous, Laura, and good for you, it worked,” he said with a tone of anger. “I don’t care about the man you were with or who he is to you, I just care that it felt calculated and I would have never guessed you as a calculating woman.”

“You have no reason to be hurt Owen.” It was Laura’s turn to scoff. “We both have duties to perform. You have to marry, and I am expected to do the same, just to someone who

isn't a duke or even a lord of a beautiful place like the manor... We both know this would have never worked out and there is no need to pretend like it would. I was simply laughing with another man, which meant nothing more than a laugh. Someday soon I will need to take my leave from here, for we all know that I simply don't belong."

Owen looked at her, not knowing what to say. She knew he wanted to say so much—most of all, that he wanted to tell her that she was wrong, and that they deserved one another, but that wasn't what he had promised his mother. He needed to stay true to that. Laura knew all that, but it didn't mean it wasn't still hard on her.

"I will accept that you meant no ill-will," Owen finally said. "I know you enough to feel that you are telling the truth now. However, if you left the manor, you would nearly kill my cousin, and I won't have her blame me for you leaving. It would destroy her, Laura."

“I would stay in touch with her, and Charles, but there will be a day—soon, in fact, that I will need to leave. I can’t live under the same roof as your soon-to-be wife.” She paused. “And it’s not because she will be your wife, it’s because she is so incredibly vile to everyone I love. I won’t be able to stand idly by and do nothing.”

Later on, as Owen and Laura arrived back to the stables, she hopped off Patience and offered to take Hermes in and ready him for the night. She was happy that her horse had found a place in the stables, as well.

She walked the horses in and put them both away, just to turn around and see Lady Marjorie standing in the hall behind her.

“Oh goodness, you startled me Lady Marjorie.” Laura held her hand on her heart. “Is there

something I can do for you? Do you need a horse readied?"

"No," Lady Marjorie said calmly. "I just wanted to tell you exactly what I thought of you."

"Oh?" Laura said.

"Yes," Lady Marjorie said. "You are a filthy schemer, you know that. Planning all these rides to be alone with my future husband. That is nowhere near ladylike, you will never deserve that title... and we all know what kinds of cads these dukes can be. How can I be sure he is being true to me with you around?"

"I beg your pardon?" Laura said, her hand returned to her chest. "I am innocent of all that you accuse me of. Although I don't know what I can say to make you believe me.

Owen... The duke and I were just out running the horses today, that's all."

"I don't believe you, and I am going to make one thing very clear to you." Lady Marjorie leaned in. "I won't be second to a servant," she said, her voice raised so loud that Laura was sure the whole Manor heard her. "You are the help, and I am a lady—and you will never in a million lifetimes be deserving to even grace the steps of Blackmore Manor, let alone keep its horses."

The screaming had apparently drawn the attention of both Lady Ellis and Sophia.

"What's all this?" Lady Ellis lifted her voice to break up the ranting Lady Marjorie was doing. "Laura why have you started a quarrel with Lady Marjorie? Answer me now... What have you done?"

Laura had enough. She knew her place and her place was not there any longer.

“Lady Ellis, you won’t have to worry about me any longer, I will be leaving Blackmore Manor as soon as I can pack my things on Patience,” Laura said. “I do appreciate everything you have done for me Sophia... thank you. Do tell Owen that I said congratulations and I wish him the best in his upcoming marriage.”

Laura side-eyed Lady Marjorie then went to gather her things... what little had been hers before she arrived.

Chapter 11

In the weeks that went by after Laura left the Manor, Owen was both sad and confused as to what had happened. This wasn't the way he wanted things to go at all, and he felt helpless.

Neither Lady Marjorie nor his mother had been honest about why she had gone, but Sophia had been. At least, she had told him her version of the story. That, he would come closer to believing than anything the lady had to say, or Lady Ellis, it would seem, at that point.

Truth be told, he and Sophia had grown to miss Laura very much. It was like a hole in their lives that not a soul could fill, much less Lady Marjorie.

Owen had noticed that since being there that Lady Marjorie's true self had come to light and he could tell that she was becoming a rather terrible person—a terror would be the more accurate word, if he had his way about it.

She had berated all of the staff and prattled on excessively to Lady Ellis about how she would run the manor once she became the new Lady Ellis, which Owen couldn't stand listening to. He didn't say anything to her, not yet anyway.

He knew that once they were wed, even though he didn't want that at all, he would say something to her about her behaviour, and as his wife, she would be obliged to agree to his wishes. Owen had never used his authority that way, but he wasn't above doing it to save the integrity of his manor and the people in it, and out of it.

On week three, he had taken about all he

could take of her, so he decided to create a week of fun away from his daily responsibilities.

He needed an excuse to stay away from her, and he knew a hunt would be the best one. It would bring enough guests that Lady Marjorie would be forced to act properly in polite society. At least that would save Owen his ears and his patience.

That was unless she decided to participate, but Owen didn't think that Lady Marjorie would even consider it, much less make an appearance outdoors to watch it. There would even be a ladies' hour on horseback to have a mini-hunt but he didn't think she would do even that.

He found himself thinking of Laura and how she would have joined right in with the men if it would have been allowed. He would have allowed it if he had the choice, but perhaps

the others wouldn't have been so keen.

She could have certainly taken part in the ladies' hour, although she wasn't technically a lady.

Owen shook his head. He couldn't believe Laura was all he could think of these days. He needed to stop. They hadn't been in a relationship to begin with, Laura had been the one to choose to leave, and besides that, he was engaged to Lady Marjorie whether he liked it or not.

Owen used the hunt as a reason to contact Laura, however. For that, he felt bad, but he knew if he could see her just once more, then he might be able to process his thoughts a little better. Lady Gundry didn't have a horse to ride during the showing of the Ladies, or to take part in the hunt with, and he thought Patience was just that horse.

His mother had always told him when his father went away that absence made the heart grow fonder, and with his father, that was one thing, but with Laura, he feared that would be the truth and that truth might bring him to his knees.

He pondered if he should attempt the visit, for he worried he wouldn't be able to leave, but in the end he decided to go. He couldn't wait to be around a woman who was kind again, other than his cousin and sometimes Lady Ellis.

Lady Marjorie, on the other hand, had alienated the entire household with her haughty manners and catty remarks. He could hardly stand it and he didn't know how his mother was putting up with it, either. If it weren't for her wanting an heir so badly, Owen knew Lady Ellis would have never put up with Lady Marjorie's attitude.

Frankly, Owen worried about how she would run the manor if and when they were wed. What had become a decent place for people to visit and work at would soon become a place of rules and regulations that would drive even him mad if he didn't put a stop to it first.

He decided that he would send a note for the hunt before venturing to town to the Pike cottage. His heart wanted him to go right then, but he knew it would all come in due time.

Owen went into the house, where he would have the plans for the hunt drawn up and sent out to other men that he would like to participate with their families. It wasn't so uncommon at the start of the Season for the Blackmore Manor to host a hunt. During that time the manor would be teeming with near royalty and their wives and children for a week.

It was one of Owen's fondest memories there growing up. Truth be told, it was due to all the horses being there and everyone riding together. Although he did rightfully feel bad for the fox at the end of the day.

He noticed Charles, Sophia, and Lady Marjorie sitting in the drawing room upon his entrance from the outdoors, but none of them saw or heard him come in. Owen stayed quiet so they wouldn't know he was there and so he might be able to see what everyone was talking about in regard to Lady Marjorie—he hadn't gotten to experience her full mood swings yet.

Not that he wanted to, but at least he would be able to form an opinion on her that didn't come from another soul.

Owen sat at his desk, putting his words to the page, when he heard Lady Marjorie prattle on.

His mother, too, walked in and took her seat, reading a letter that had just come by delivery boy.

“Sophia, dear,” Lady Marjorie said, using a kind tone that was laced with malice. Even Owen could tell that what she had to say wasn’t going to be good by the tone of her voice.

“Yes, Lady Marjorie?” Sophia asked, putting her embroidery hoop down on her lap to face the other woman.

Owen was proud of Sophia for being kind even when she didn’t have to be. Lady Marjorie had been plenty rude to his cousin; she had no cause to converse with this woman who wanted nothing of her any other time.

“I should think it is time for you to be looking

for housing elsewhere after the wedding,” Lady Marjorie said. “Perhaps before, even—perhaps a ladies’ home or a nunnery?”

Sophia was obviously taken aback by Lady Marjorie’s words. Owen could see the tears in her eyes, but he wanted to hear Lady Marjorie before he said anything to either of them. He and his mother exchanged a glance as Owen put his finger to his lips, telling his mother not to give away that he was in there.

Owen could also see that Charles was biting his upper lip, trying not to say anything, as well. He knew his friend wanted to defend Sophia’s honour, but none of them knew what would happen should he say a word.

“Why is that?” Sophia asked. “I was invited here by my aunt and cousin to live as long as it took to find a husband of good standing. Am I correct, Aunt Phoebe? I don’t feel as though I should live elsewhere when I have been

invited.”

Before Lady Ellis could get a word in edgewise, Lady Marjorie piped up, and none of them liked what she had to say.

“Well, as you know, dear, I will want to have privacy with my new husband, and there simply will be no place or time for you here,” Lady Marjorie said. “You and Charles will need to not be here, especially if I am to bear an heir. There would be no place for either of you in my, Owen’s, or our child’s life.”

Sophia was upset and looked to Lady Ellis, who also looked distressed by Lady Marjorie’s words, but she said nothing. Owen wondered if his mother was speechless or simply didn’t care to rock the boat any more than the lady just had.

Owen was sick, he knew Sophia considered the manor her home, as she should. She deserved to be there as much as anyone else, and there was no way Charles would be run off, either. He needed to decide what to say to his future wife about her words to the people he loved, the same people he wouldn't allow to go anywhere.

Sophia ran from the room in tears, and Charles raced after her. Lady Ellis gave Owen a sympathetic look as she looked back down at her missive.

Owen decided right then and there that more guests at the manor for the hunt would be a buffer between them and Marjorie, and perhaps give him time to think about things a bit.

He needed to lay eyes on her to quell his quarrelling heart. He hated the things he was feeling and the thoughts he was having

without her there. Moreover, he disliked the thoughts he was having about her that he couldn't act on.

Later the next day, and with a great deal of nervousness about the situation, Owen rode into town and to the other side, towards the Pikes' cottage.

Immediately he saw Laura outside with Patience at her side. She had clearly been riding and Owen couldn't help but feel his heart skip a beat at seeing her once again.

"Owen?" she questioned at seeing him ride up.
"I mean, Duke Owen."

"Just Owen, we will always be friends," he said. "May I call you Laura?"

“Miss Pike will do for me.” She smiled at him. “No, what else would you call me?” she teased.

To Owen, it felt like they had never been apart. It was nice but he felt forlorn, as well.

“Well, Miss Pike, I do apologise, but I am in need of some services that I thought you might provide.” He, too, played along.

“I am in need of a horse, one that might be good for a hunt, and I thought you might be able to oblige,” he said as he dismounted Hermes.

Laura was quiet and polite, but it was evident to Owen that she missed him just as much as he missed her.

He stood beside her and helped her unbridle Patience; his hand slid next to hers and he felt the connection between them. Longing looks were passed back and forth, and Owen did everything he could not to take her hand, for then he would be no better than the Vicar.

“Sophia misses you,” Owen said, but he left out the part of him missing her, too.

“Oh, I miss her so much, as well. I wish things would have been different, but they weren’t, and that’s okay,” Laura told him. “Would you mind passing this note to her for me? I wrote it a week or so ago, and was trying to figure a way to get it to her. Since you’re here now, why not just send it with you, right?”

“Of course, I will,” Owen said. “Did you write it yourself? Oh, I didn’t mean to sound insensitive.”

“Yes, I did.” She smiled. “You may read it, if you like.”

“No, I don’t want to do that to you, it isn’t fair to read your private missive,” Owen said tenderly. “But I am beyond proud of you for learning to write and read, it’s great.”

“Can I read it to you?” she asked.

“If you’d like,” he told her.

She unfolded the letter and looked at it a moment. The last time he had heard her read, it was a tad stilted, he was even more impressed after hearing her read this time.

“Dear Sophia, I miss you more than words can say... Owen, too, but he is better off without me around shaking things up so much. I do hope you are happy, and that one day you will decide that Charles is the best choice for you. I pray Lady Marjorie has calmed down now that I am gone, though I am sure she hasn’t. I hope we can still be friends. Post Script, I wrote this all by myself, you are a wonderful teacher. Love, Laura,” she finished, and Owen’s eyes were misty by the end of it.

“That’s beautiful,” he said.

“I don’t regret any of it,” Laura said to him as she folded the letter again and handed it back to Owen.

“How do you mean?” he asked as he moved closer. This time, she didn’t back away.

“I don’t regret feeling for you the way that I did, well, do. I don’t regret getting to know Sophia, Charles, or even your mother. I loved the manor and I miss Hermes something fierce. It was the best time in my life, even if it wasn’t long, and I will cherish it always,” Laura said, as she placed her hand over his.

“As will I,” Owen said. “I don’t regret any of it. I will always have feelings for you, forever and always, and nothing, not even a forced marriage to Lady Marjorie, could change that.”

Laura blushed and Owen knew it was his time to take his leave.

As he left, he felt sad. Still, he knew they needed to show restraint because they could not be together.

He watched as she went inside as he walked around to the other side of the house to get his horse. He didn't want to leave but he knew he had to. He paused by a window when he thought he could hear Laura crying in the house. He hated to leave her like that, but he got on Hermes and headed back towards the manor.

As he rode, Owen decided to open Hermes up. He hadn't run him much since he and Laura had raced that first time together.

"Yaw," he said as Hermes took off towards the cliffs.

Owen rode Hermes hard, thinking of his frustrations and all his concerns with having to marry a woman he did not love and losing the one he did love. It was a horrible feeling that he didn't even wish on Lady Marjorie herself.

At the end of the week, guests had begun arriving at the manor. It was a sure-fire way to allow Owen the much-needed distraction he was hoping for, though Lady Marjorie was trying to follow him around a bit more than he had thought she would at first.

The hunt had been going well, until, per his request, they had an hour-long portion of the hunt reserved for the women that wanted to take part. Again, he knew this would be a perk for Laura, but it was no shock to him that Lady Marjorie hadn't wanted to join in.

"Can I ride Hermes, or did Laura lend us Patience?" Sophia asked Owen.

"Lord Gundry's wife is riding Patience. You can have Hermes this time, he seems to like you because you are Laura's friend."

Sophia nodded, and she was helped on top of the large horse.

She sat there with Owen not far behind. The trumpet was sounded, and the horses took off. Something must have spooked Hermes, however, as he reared back on his hind legs.

Owen held his breath as he saw Sophia fall to the ground, the material from her riding dress splayed all around her. Owen and Charles took off running in her direction and quickly found she was unconscious.

“Let’s get her back inside,” Owen said as he watched his horse continue to run in the other direction.

“Let’s,” Charles said. “That beast needs put down.”

While Owen knew Charles meant it, he also knew his friend was in pain and hurt by seeing the woman he loved thrown to the ground and not moving. Truth be told, Owen didn’t even know what to do. Perhaps Charles was right, and he needed to put Hermes down... He was an old one, after all, and it was likely time.

“You may be right,” Owen admitted sadly. “I’m going to go find him before he hurts anyone else. You get Sophia inside and tended to. Is there a doctor anywhere nearby?”

A few men stepped out of the crowd and followed as Sophia was taken into the manor. Owen, on the other hand, hopped on Patience, now free from her rider due to the accident. He went towards the one place he knew Hermes would have gone to... the Pikes’ cottage.

Owen showed up at the cottage and, sure enough, Laura was standing outside, petting Hermes on the nose.

“Something bad has happened,” Owen said, as he rode up towards Laura.

“What’s going on?” she asked in worry.

Owen could tell that Laura was already worried at seeing Hermes without his rider.

“Sophia was riding him for the ladies’ hunt. She was side saddle, of course, and he got spooked for some reason,” Owen said.

“He didn’t throw her, did he?” Laura asked in fear. She must have been able to see the look in his eye that told the truth. “Oh, heavens, is she all right?”

“She wasn’t awake when they took her into the manor. I told them I was going to find Hermes so he didn’t harm anyone else, though I knew where he would come. Can you keep him here until some of this blows over? People will have him put down if I’m not careful, though I’m still not sure that isn’t the best outcome,” Owen said with great sadness in his voice.

“Of course, he’s more than welcome to stay here for as long as needed, look at all you have done for my father and me. We owe you at least that much, but I do ask one thing,” Laura finished, as a tear graced her face.

“Anything,” Owen said.

“Take me back with you to the manor. I need to be with Sophia,” Laura said, and Owen nodded as he patted the back of Patience for her to climb aboard.

Chapter 12

In no time, they had gotten to the manor. Laura had determination behind her eyes as she knew Sophia was her top priority; in her opinion, not a soul could take care of her friend quite like Laura would. Laura also thought it would be a good stick to Lady Marjorie, should she arrive with Owen.

She shook her head. She should not think like that at all, she was never a vindictive person—though as she ascended the steps off the courtyard and onto the wrap-around veranda, she smiled.

Owen had told her about the conversation in the drawing room about Sophia needing to leave, and Laura did all she could do to hold her tongue as she saw Lady Marjorie sitting on the seat within the very first room after the

door had been opened for her.

“I beg your pardon,” Lady Marjorie said as she held her hand over her chest.

“Well, keep begging, my lady, I’m not here for you, nor Owen.” She smiled as she gave a small mocking curtsy.

“You will address him as his grace or duke, do you understand me peasant?” Lady Marjorie said as she got to her feet and looked at Laura as she went past. “Do you hear me? Leave, be gone right this instant.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Laura said as she headed up the stairs and towards Sophia’s quarters. She knew it well from the time she had acted as her companion.

“Come back down here now, you, you, you river tick, or I will be forced to call the authorities,” Lady Marjorie babbled on.

“I will be going to see my friend,” she shouted down to Lady Marjorie. “You go ahead and call the authorities,” she finished as she went on her way.

The last thing Laura heard before going to be with her friend, was Lady Marjorie yelling at Owen.

“Do be nice, Lady Marjorie, that woman is Sophia’s best chance at recovery,” Owen replied, his tone firm.

“If you will have her here, then I won’t be,” Lady Marjorie said very loudly.

“Fine, then,” Owen said to her. “She is a part of this family, more than you are, so I will say to you goodbye, and have a nice trip,” he finished, but Laura couldn’t hear if any more was said, as she was already at Sophia’s side.

Laura hated that her friend hadn’t yet woken up, but by the looks of her, other than a bump on her head, she seemed to be all right. Laura assumed she was suffering from a concussion and recalled her father recovering from one when she was younger.

She had watched her mother nurse him back to health, and in a few days, he was back in the stables of Gundry Manor.

Laura sat with Sophia for three days before she began to come to, but only a little at a time. She knew not to talk to her too much, she didn’t want to risk Sophia slipping further

into her state of unconsciousness.

Charles, on the other hand, had all but paced a hole in the floor in front of the door in the hall until he was able to hear something of her recovery. Until that point, there hadn't been much to tell him either, which only made matters worse for Charles. The only time he left the landing was if Laura called for something that was needed for Sophia. She couldn't imagine a nursemaid being any faster than Charles had been while retrieving things to aid Sophia into health.

“Can you get me a cool cloth?” she asked him softly as she saw Sophia break into a sweat.

“Right away,” Charles said, and in moments he had gone down to retrieve what had been asked of him.

The cloth was promptly brought to her and she dabbed it on Sophia's forehead. She had done this every few hours for the past few days, since her friend's body had been in and out of fever.

Laura knew with the fever that the concussion was a bad one, though she never relayed that to anyone. There wasn't any need to worry people any more than they were, especially Charles, who hated seeing the woman he loved in pain, and Owen, who felt responsible for his cousin's condition.

On day four, Sophia had begun to stir a little, but not much, no more than a small moan here and there. Laura had not as left the room other than for necessities. She had spent most her time tending to Sophia, cleaning her quarters, and having things laundered.

The only time she had slept was when she dozed on the settee at the foot of the bed. She

had all but given up on sleep; when she would finally begin to drift, Sophia would make a small sound or her teeth would start chattering, which meant the fever had returned.

Little by little, she began to realise that she hadn't seen Lady Marjorie around the manor during some of her short trips in and out of the room. Another thing Laura had noticed was that Lady Ellis had her eye on her as she ran about gathering things for Sophia or telling folks what needed to be done.

She and Owen talked a little here and there, but Sophia was her primary focus... for now. She knew Owen would have been there right by her side had that have been an appropriate action, but it wasn't, therefore Laura was left alone.

That evening, Lady Ellis entered the kitchen to find Laura fixing some broth and medicinal

items for Sophia, some things her mother had taught her before she passed, and even more that her father had taught her since.

“How is she?” Lady Ellis asked kindly in a tone of worry.

Laura was shocked at her tone and true interest in Sophia. She knew the lady had to care for her niece, but it still took Laura aback that she had approached her about it.

“She woke up a little bit earlier,” Laura said. “I have made her some broth and a pain tonic of whiskey, honey, and peppermint... It’s an old recipe my father used on me after my mother passed. It works for colds, pain, just about anything that ails you. It is a shame that Doc Mills has not yet returned.”

“That it is,” Lady Ellis said. “However, it

seems as though you have been doing a lovely enough job taking care of our Sophia.”

“Thank you,” Laura said, as she began to walk with the tray of items towards the door leading out of the kitchen.

“You do know,” Lady Ellis said as she stopped Laura with the soft touch of her hand, “that I do believe you now, that you weren’t the cause of the quarrel in the stables. I got to see what a difficult person Lady Marjorie could be. I am pleased to see you, Laura.”

“Could be?” Laura asked in shock. “How do you mean?”

“Oh, yes,” Lady Ellis said. “Lady Marjorie was useless in domestic matters and has returned to London, per my son’s and my request. She will return once the Season has come, but I

doubt that will be for long, either.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Laura said. “I pray I’m not the cause.”

“I’m not sorry at all,” Lady Ellis said as she continued to speak kindly to Laura for the first time. “And yes, you may have had a tad to do with the situation, but again, I’m not sorry in the least. Might I go with you to see Sophia?”

“Yes, of course,” Laura said as she repositioned the tray of items and broth and they made their way up the steps.

Laura wondered what had changed the situation between her and the lady. Perhaps the lady had seen the light—either that or Lady Marjorie was truly an awful enough person to cause Lady Ellis such a great deal of distaste. Either way, Laura was happy to see

that she had perhaps gained a friend in Lady Ellis.

Laura smiled at Charles, who was asleep to the right of the door, as she propped the tray on her hip and opened the door into Sophia's quarters. Both looked on in shock at what they saw when they entered. Lady Ellis was excited, as was Laura, to see that Sophia was sitting up in bed. Her skin was paler than usual, but other than that, the bump had faded to a bruise.

“What happened?” she said groggily.

“Here, drink this and I will tell you.” Laura handed her the broth and sat beside her. Lady Ellis sat on the other side of the bed.

“This tastes amazing,” Sophia said. “But why are you here?” she asked. “I mean, I’m happy,

but...”

“But nothing,” Laura said. “I am here now and that’s all that matters. You fell and bumped your head, Owen retrieved me, and here I am... have been for half a week now.”

“Oh no,” Sophia said, as she reached up and felt where her head must have been sore. “How is Charles?”

“He is a tad worried, to say the least,” Lady Ellis said.

“Yes,” Laura added. “He has been pacing a hole into Lady Ellis’ rug in the hall.”

The three of them laughed together and Laura was having trouble with how odd it felt that

Owen's mother was being nice.

Perhaps she wasn't such a bad woman. Laura understood that she only wanted the best for her son, and needed an heir to their good fortune and name, but that didn't mean everything... Well, it shouldn't, anyway.

Little by little, Sophia gained her strength enough to walk the halls. Charles did everything he could not to rush her when she walked out the door.

"We need some privacy, Charles, while Sophia gets cleaned up, but she will be down later today, or tomorrow at the latest, if she continues to recover," Lady Ellis said, and Laura agreed.

Charles made his way down the steps, but not before casting a longing glance in her

direction. Laura caught the look and smiled.

“We have her taken care of,” Laura promised as he finished his descent.

Lady Ellis sat in Sophia’s quarters after they had gotten her cleaned up in her dressing room. Laura noticed that as she and Sophia keep each other company, Lady Ellis sat back and watched.

“Oh, I have something for you,” Laura said to Sophia. “I had given it to Owen, but he hadn’t gotten it to you before the accident,” she finished as she pulled the letter she had written out of her skirt pocket.

“What is this?” Sophia asked with a smile.

“I wrote it for you,” she said, grinning back. “Do you wish me to read it out loud?” Laura asked, but then she felt slightly embarrassed by the content and saying it in front of Owen’s mother.

“Yes, please,” Sophia said, and Laura did as she was asked and read the letter to Sophia.

“It looks like all those lessons with Sophia have paid off, colour me impressed,” Lady Ellis said to Laura’s shock.

“Yes, I am proud, as well,” Sophia praised Laura. “I know this is an odd request, but could we go down to the sitting room and listen to some of your music boxes, Aunt? I think it might lift my spirits.”

“Yes, of course.” Lady Ellis smiled. “And perhaps either Laura or I might play

something on the piano.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Sophia said.

In no time, the two women had helped Sophia down the stairs. They had her seated in the sitting room, where Charles was, and the look on his face showed he was happy to be in the same room as her for more than a moment.

“Could we play the little brass box, Aunt?” Sophia asked, as she pointed to one of the many music boxes sitting on a shelf above where the grand-looking piano sat.

Lady Ellis had been procuring music boxes as decoration for years, almost since their first showings around 1790. Sophia had loved to listen to them as a child, but Laura knew this one box in particular made her feel good.

Though she didn't know what the song was, it was an upbeat and peppy tune that she would love to dance to when visiting the manor.

Lady Ellis opened it and music began to fill the air.

"Will you dance for me, Laura?" Sophia asked.

"I would, but I don't know how," Laura said.

"It's nothing," Sophia said. "If I was well enough, I would show you."

"Here, come stand here with me," Lady Ellis said as she pointed to the floor in front of her.

Laura did as she was instructed and went to stand toe to toe with Lady Ellis. She smiled as the lady took her hand in the air and stood a good deal away from her.

Lady Ellis began to sway to the music as she moved her feet. Laura matched her movements to it as Sophia cheered and giggled from her resting place. Charles had moved closer to Sophia to watch.

Laura found herself getting so caught up in the music that she spun around, leaving Lady Ellis to dance alone. Laura moved her feet and held her hands out, as if she were dancing with a prince. She closed her eyes and envisioned Owen on the other side, dancing with her.

Suddenly, she felt a set of hands slip into hers. She was sure these hands did not belong to Lady Ellis and half-wondered if Charles had

joined her. When she opened her eyes, she saw Owen standing in front of her, his eyes staring down at her, his mussed blond hair blowing as they twirled.

“Owen,” she said breathlessly.

“This, my dear, is called the waltz,” he said, as he changed their pattern.

Within minutes, they were dancing in sync. It was beautiful and fluid. From the other side of the room, now watching the dance unfold, was Lady Ellis. She smiled at the couple.

Lady Ellis’ opinion of the pair seemed to be quickly changing.

Chapter 13

Laura had fallen nicely into place at the manor. She was happy to see Sophia getting better day by day. There was no spoken day that she took off since she was there as a friend, however she made sure to visit her father and Hermes as often as she could. Oftentimes, Owen would accompany her to see the horse, as well, and her father after they got to know one another better.

She and Lady Ellis were getting to know each other better, too, and she had even helped Lady Ellis and Sophia plan the upcoming ball at Blackmore Manor.

Laura was in a bit of a panic as she had heard that Lady Marjorie was returning to the manor. She assumed it was for the ball, but it wasn't her place to say anything. She had

assumed that things between Owen and the lady had been broken off, but doubts began to set in and she didn't know anymore, although she realised Owen was spending more and more time with her.

On the day of Lady Marjorie's arrival, Laura made sure to stay in Sophia's quarters as much as she could. She wasn't afraid of the woman, either what she would say or do, she just didn't want to look at her and Owen together.

"Oh, here you are," Sophia said, as she walked into her small sitting room. "Lady Ellis is looking for you. She and Lady Marjorie are in the study."

"Are you sure she is looking for me?" Laura said in shock. "While Lady Marjorie is in there?"

“That’s what she said,” Sophia told her. “I would head down there if I were you. You don’t want to make my aunt come up here.”

“No, I wouldn’t want that at all. I am finally in Lady Ellis’ good graces.”

Laura got to her feet and put down the project she had been working on and walked down to the lower-level study. She was shocked to hear some of the things that were being said behind the closed doors. She felt guilty for listening in, but perhaps that was what Lady Ellis wanted.

“Lady Ellis,” Lady Marjorie said in her sweetest tone. “I am so happy to have this ball in honour of Owen’s and my engagement.”

“What is it you are prattling on about, child?” Lady Ellis asked. “This ball is not for you, it’s

for the sake of coming out for those of our society. Now, you, on the other hand,” Lady Ellis paused for a moment, “I regret to inform you that the engagement is off.”

“But why?” Lady Marjorie asked.

“Frankly, you were not kind to my staff, or my niece, or Laura, who is a lovely woman. Your manners and capability to head a house are appalling, and I doubt you would make a suitable wife or mother for anyone, least of all my Owen. Now, need I go on?”

“No, Your Grace,” Lady Marjorie said.

“So, I apologise for you coming so far with misconceptions, but you may take your leave and I wish you luck in any further engagement you may have.”

“You have made me look undesirable, with a failed engagement,” Lady Marjorie said.

“No, you do that well enough on your own,” Lady Ellis answered her.

Laura took a breath as she was near the door that Marjorie was flying out of in a fit of rage.

“Owen,” she screamed as she stormed into the next room.

She then turned and looked Laura in the eye. Laura smirked as Owen came running into the room. The overnight guests had begun gathering for the ball.

“You’ve heard the news, have you?” Owen said.

“Do tell me now! Do you care for another?” Lady Marjorie carried on as she showed her true colours to the guests.

“As if I owe you anything, but yes, if you must know, I have loved another since long before you were around,” Owen said. “I tried to forget her, I tried to ignore it, I was willing to give it all up for you, but... well, you seem to have shown yourself a bit too much around here, and I would prefer to be a bachelor for my whole life than spend just a day with you as my wife.”

Lady Marjorie flew into the drawing room and was taken aback by the fact that the vicar was standing there.

“Move, you dirty excuse for a man,” she yelled at him. “You and Laura deserve one another,” she screamed but then took off out the door. Her people followed, each of them snickering.

Laura assumed they had all been waiting for the day that someone would tell her what for.

Laura walked into the room that Lady Ellis was sitting in as she heard Sophia getting onto the vicar.

“You were told you weren’t welcome here,” Sophia said. “Laura is above your station; you should not pursue her any longer. And that woman who just ran out of this manor is a more suitable match for you than any woman I have met, now see yourself off the property for good.”

The vicar left the manor, embarrassed and

offended, and Laura's heart swelled ten sizes.

"I was told you wanted to see me Lady Ellis," Laura said, as she closed the door to the study. "I would have been here sooner, but there have been a few entertainers amidst our company that were worth seeing perform." She chuckled, and Lady Ellis joined her.

"Please, call me Phoebe," Lady Ellis told her.

"Phoebe it is, then." Laura smiled. "Was there something I could do for you before I head home to see Father for the weekend? I don't want to be in the way of the guests and the ball."

"Yes, my dear, would you care to take that parcel up to Sophia's quarters for me?" Phoebe asked. "I will gather her promptly and we will join you up there to unveil her dress for the

ball together.”

“Yes, of course,” Laura said, as she took the parcel and made her way up the steps and to Sophia’s quarters.

She hung it over the foot of the bed and couldn’t wait to find out what Lady Ellis—Phoebe—had chosen for Sophia. At least by being a part of the dressing process, Laura would get to experience a little of what it was like to go to a ball.

Moments later, Lady Ellis and Sophia made their way into the room.

“I am so very excited for this,” Sophia said, and Laura was happy to see that she looked much better than even a few days before.

Lady Ellis walked over and hung the parcel on a hook beside Sophia's dressing mirror. She undid the front of it to expose a gorgeous ball gown.

"This is your gown, Sophia, I chose the blue to go with your eyes," Lady Ellis said with a smile.

Laura was awestruck by the dress, which was royal blue with an empire-style waist. Its V-neck and short sleeves looked nice with the taffeta and pearls that covered the hem.

"And this," Lady Ellis spoke up, bringing Laura out of her own thoughts about the dress and how beautiful Sophia would look in it, "is yours," she said as she pulled Sophia's dress away to reveal a second gown.

This one was red with an empire waist, square neckline, and slimmer bodice. It was covered in silk organza and had lots of lace at the bottom and towards the layered hem.

“What do you mean, mine?” Laura asked in bewilderment.

“You can’t go to the ball without a ball gown,” Sophia said with a smile.

“Yes.” Lady Ellis smiled, as well. “It wouldn’t be an event without you there.”

Laura was in tears; while she doubted that she could ever be a lady, she would give it a try.

“I don’t know that I have what it takes,” Laura said. “But I will give it everything I’ve got.”

She smiled, unsure if she should hug Lady Ellis or just thank her.

She mustered the most ladylike curtsy that she could and gave it to Lady Ellis.

“You will do just fine, and if you have any questions, find either Sophia or me and we will help you,” Lady Ellis said. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have some things to tend to before this place falls apart at the seams without me.”

Sophia and Laura both watched as Lady Ellis took her leave.

“You’re going to do just fine,” Sophia reassured her. “Remember that being a lady can be learned but being a good person cannot, and that is exactly what you are Laura—a good person. And in my opinion,” Sophia

sat and patted the seat next to her, waiting while Laura took her seat, “it’s far more important that Owen marry a good person than a lady.”

Laura was hopeful but cautious of Sophia’s thoughts. Maybe she and Owen would be together, but she knew as well as anyone else that only time would be able to tell.

Chapter 14

Owen was overwhelmed with joy at how his mother had handled the situation regarding Lady Marjorie. He had still been willing to go on with the engagement, should his mother still think it was a good idea, though he would have gone into it broken-hearted and glum.

He sat in his mother's sitting room, waiting on her to enter. She had told him that it was important that she speak with him in private before the ball, where not a soul could hear them.

Her private sitting room was the best chance they had at that. Although not a soul other than lady's maids were allowed there, there had been a time or two that she had asked him to join her for a private meeting. The last time was to tell him that his father had died.

He looked around the room and the things that were in there, some of them were things that were there all those years ago. Though some of the fabric and colours had changed, it felt the same.

“Mother,” he said getting to his feet as she entered the room, dressed for the ball.

“Have a seat, son, I want to talk to you about something, and it was important that I do it before the ball,” Lady Ellis said with a smile on her face.

The smile reassured him that it wasn't something bad that she was bringing to him. That helped to lighten his worry and the tension that had been between his shoulders since hearing that he had been summoned.

“I need to admit something to you before it’s too late,” she told him.

“What’s that, Mother?” he asked, and though he thought he had a feeling what it might be, he didn’t know for sure. He hated to guess and get hurt in the end.

“I just wanted to let you know that I think I have made a mistake.” Lady Ellis looked her son in the eye. “Well, I don’t think, I know. And it takes a lot for me to admit to that, you know that as well as anyone.”

“That I do,” Owen said. “Do you mind telling me what you think you have made a mistake about? Oh, goodness, you haven’t second-guessed your decision to send Lady Marjorie away, have you?” he asked, terrified to know the answer.

“Oh, nothing like that, dear,” she said, and he nearly melted into the high-backed chair.

“Then what?”

“Owen, I want you to know that if you marry —” she began.

“If?” he asked.

“Let your mother finish, I’m getting old and don’t have time to waste,” she said to him, but it was more of a tease than a true admonishment. “*If* you should get married, I have decided that it should be your choice, if, who, or when you should do so.”

Owen was shocked. In his wildest dreams, he had hoped this might have been what she had to talk to him about, but he doubted it. Now that she had said it out loud, his mind was having trouble processing it. She was giving him the choice, and it was as if he didn't have to think about it.

He knew he had already made his decision.

“Thank you, Mother,” he said, but he knew a little thanks wasn't good enough for her.

He scooted closer to her and, for the first time since he was a little boy, he gave her a hug. They both melted into one another. This would not have been proper for them to have done this in front of anyone, but they weren't in front of a soul, and it felt good for him to be holding his mother.

Since his father had passed, Owen had had trouble relating to, much less loving, his mother. He didn't hate her by any means, he just couldn't agree with anything that she had told him about being married and having children.

They pulled apart and Lady Ellis had tears in her eyes.

"You should know that it was your father's wish for you to bring forth a purebred son to carry on the family name, but it is your life and any woman you choose, though I think I know which one that might be, will bring honour and happiness to the Ellis household for years to come."

"I will promise you one thing," Owen said.

"What's that?" Lady Ellis asked him.

“No matter what, you will have a grandchild—a grandson—and the name Ellis will live on. For that, I will honour Father, but I could not be any happier to know that I have been given the right to choose. For the first time in my life, I am ready to wed.”

They both talked a little more before heading down to be introduced at the ball. The herald was calling people by name and Owen found himself waiting for Laura to be called.

The moment he heard his cousin's name called, he knew his best friend Charles and the woman of his dreams wouldn't be far behind.

“Colonel Charles Godwin, accompanying Miss Sophia Redman,” the herald called out and the two walked down into the ballroom together. “Miss Laura Pike,” he called next, and Owen

nearly forgot how to breathe.

He couldn't keep his eyes off her as she walked down the stairs. He met her at the base and took her hand.

“I do apologise, Mother and I were having a chat or I would have been there to walk with you,” Owen told her, and he could see her blush. “You do know that entrance was worthy of the status of lady, but best for the name of Laura Pike, the woman that I care for in every manner of the word.”

“You jest,” she said as she continued to blush.

“Will you have this dance with me?” he asked, as he bowed a little.

A song was being played by the musicians at the front of the hall—a waltz.

Owen couldn't help but stare at her as she handed him her gloved hand. She was beautiful and graceful as she danced with Owen, admired by their guests.

They were indeed the couple that others kept interest in. Song after song played as they continued to dance together.

“Would you like to take a break?” Owen asked her. “Perhaps take a walk with me in the garden?”

“Is that allowed?” she asked.

“I am the duke of this manor—you forget that

for me, anything is allowed,” he teased her.

“I wouldn’t have thought Lord Ellis would be so pompous, but I will agree nonetheless,” she teased, as he took her arm and led her out the side door into the beautiful gardens.

Owen loved the look in her eye at seeing the gardens all lit up. There were candles and lanterns along the lovely walks weaving in and out of various bushes and plants. All of which his mother knew the names of, but he had cared less to know them... until now. Somehow, seeing something with Laura at his side was like seeing it for the very first time. She gave him new life where things had been dark and dreary before.

The pair passed Sophia and Charles and exchanged glances with the couple as they made their way back to the ball.

Owen walked to the centre, where a labyrinth of rose bushes ended on a circular path. His mother had all their names carved into the path that had been laid there since he was a boy. Again, this was a place he didn't frequent, but he thought that might change now.

"Laura," he said as he interrupted her from smelling a rose.

"Yes," she said, as she stood to her full height and smiled at him.

Her beauty was like none other, and he couldn't help but look at her as if she were a prize he had won, though he didn't want to think of her as such. The reason he loved her so much was because she was unlike any woman he had met.

“Laura,” he said as he knelt on one knee. “I love your independence, and that you don’t need to be told when or how to do things. I love that you love horses just as much as I do; I love that you fit into my crazy world, even when society says you shouldn’t. I love the evening when the twinkling stars dance in your eyes; I love when you step on my toes as we waltz.” He smiled, and she giggled. “I love that I can tell you anything and you don’t judge me, and I love that you can be the person I can see as my forever. Laura, I love you, in every meaning of the word... Will you marry me?” he asked as he held up his mother’s wedding ring, the one his father had given to her all those years ago.

“Owen... yes!” she said to him. “I have loved you since I first saw you that day on the cliff riding Hermes. I had worried that you were bad like Gundry, but then you proved that you were different, we are different... Let’s do this together.”

“I will aspire every day of my life to be good enough for you, for you are the best person I have ever known,” Owen said, as he slipped the ring on her hand.

The pair walked together back to the ball. They walked in to find Lady Ellis, Sophia, and Charles standing in waiting. Owen guessed they must have known what was going to happen that night.

Owen picked up Laura’s hand to reveal the ring on her finger. They all cheered nearly as loud as the music, and later that night, Lady Ellis stood in the middle of the room to address their guests.

“Welcome, beloved guests, I, Lady Phoebe Ellis, welcome you here at Blackmore Manor to enjoy these festivities. With the London Season approaching, this is the perfect time for young ladies such as these,” she gestured to some of the younger ladies who were

making their appearance in society for the first time, “to come out into polite society. And I am happy that each year the opening Season and our ball act as a way to do that, but today is about much more than that. I would like to invite my son up to join me, and Miss Laura Pike.” She reached out for the pair to stand next to her.

“Thank you, Mother,” Owen said, as he leaned over and kissed her hand.

“This night is about announcing the new engagement of my son, Lord Owen Ellis, Duke of Blackmore Manor, to this lovely lady, Miss Laura Pike.”

The crowd erupted into cheers. In that moment, Owen knew they would have some obstacles that would need overcoming, but he was not worried that he and his soon-to-be wife were of different stations—they were happy that love had been found, and so they

celebrated with light hearts and merriment.

Chapter 15

Laura stood in front of her dressing mirror at the manor. She had been given living quarters next to Sophia until she became Lady Laura Ellis. She still couldn't believe that was going to happen for her in a matter of hours, but it was the best thing she could imagine.

She had always heard tales of princes and princesses, but never did she ever think she would feel like one, much less be marrying someone just as grand as a prince ever could be.

Her dress what pure white, and lace ran all the way down the empire bodice until it touched the ground. The same person that Lady Ellis had commissioned to create her ball gown had made the wedding gown, as well.

She wore a thin veil over her face as she walked down the aisle to the music played by the little copper music box. It was being played on the piano by none other than Sophia herself.

The entire time the ceremony was going on, Laura looked deep into Owen's eyes. She felt a blissful happiness that she had never thought possible.

"I will always be the beginning to your mornings, and the end to your long days, the middle of the afternoon when it decides to rain," Laura began. "I will be in the saddle beside you when the horses take a run, and your best friend right beside you, rearing to have some fun," she finished, and it was his turn to say his vows.

"You are my best friend, aside from Charles

and Hermes, because you know horses and colonels come first.” He laughed, and so did she. “No, in all seriousness, you are the saver of my name, the fulfiller of a wish long foretold, you are the now and forever to days that are long and cold. You are my everything,” Owen said, and Laura felt a tear fall.

They were pronounced husband and wife, and everyone cheered. Afterwards, Lady Ellis held a reception at the manor for those in attendance.

They were happy that the vicar hadn’t been heard from since leaving the manor per Sophia’s demand, and that Lady Marjorie had since moved on to Lord Gundry’s son... That was a match made perfectly, if Laura thought so herself.

As the guests ate, celebrated, and danced, the music faded for just a moment.

“I would like your attention,” Owen said, as Laura held his hand. “I would like to ask my friend Charles to come up here, he has a few words to say.”

Charles made his way to the front of the room and turned to face the crowd. He found Sophia with his eyes immediately to make sure she was there to hear what he had to say.

“Sometimes, love is funny in how it comes when you least expect it. I know it’s important to some that we keep to our status, but some of us think it’s high time to abolish that line of thinking... Look here at my friends, the duke and duchess.” He pointed towards Owen and Laura. “So, after talking to the parents of Sophia Redman, and gaining their approval, I would hope the rest of you can grant it, too—but, if not, that won’t make a difference when,” Charles got down on one knee and presented a ring that Owen had helped him

get, “I ask Sophia,” he looked to make sure that she was looking and saw that tears of joy were running down her face, “if she will marry me?”

He paused for a moment. “Sophia Redman, will you be my wife?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she said, as she walked up as calmly as she could and allowed him to present her with the ring.

Laura could tell that inside she was screaming, and she couldn’t be any happier for her best friend.

The celebrations for the newlyweds and the newly-affianced couple went on for over a week. So many people expressed that they were happy things were beginning to change status-wise, while those that did not agree

simply didn't say anything, which surprised Laura.

Laura and Owen were married, which was all that mattered. As Laura looked around, all she could see were the real people that mattered the most to them, the ones who had supported their love the most.

Sophia and Charles attended, along with Lady Ellis. Harry was there with Old Jack, with Hermes and Patience tied up in the distance.

After the ceremony, Laura and Owen hopped on their horses and rode along the path where they had first spoken. Hermes and Patience grazed in a meadow as the couple held hands.

"This is the happiest time of my life," Laura said, as she squeezed Owen's hand gently.

“You have no idea how happy you have made me,” Owen said in agreement.

They didn’t know what life was going to bring them, but what they did know was that happiness was sure to follow. They wanted so much for their life ahead—they just needed to take it one step at a time.

THE END

Can't get enough of Laura and Owen? Then make sure to check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

How will Blackmore's society respond to the

couple's marriage?

*Is Lady Marjorie's stay at the manor going to
influence her serenity at all?*

*Will Laura ever see her father again after he
decides to remain at the cottage?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser
<http://arianorton.com/laura>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the
page to read the first chapters from “**When A
Maid Captivates His Heart**”, my Amazon Best-
Selling novel!)*

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue dress and a gold bonnet with a blue ribbon, is looking out a window. The room is decorated with a large mirror, a vase of flowers, and a small table.

ARIA NORTON

WHEN A MAID
CAPTIVATES
HIS HEART

When A Maid Captivates His Heart

Introduction

Lady Astrid Burgess is the quiet sort of girl who enjoys reading about adventures and the epic exploits of storybook knights and princesses, rather than actually living her own out in the world. Under the shadow of her vivacious sister, Astrid never believed she is worth the kind of romance she routinely read about. In a sudden stroke of luck though, she meets Matthew, a dashing bookshop owner, in Finsbury Square and reality itself comes and shakes her to the core. Although all Astrid wanted was to stay out of her sister's way during the social season, her days as the

thoughtful, well-behaved sister suddenly end when Matthew comes along. Will she be able to find a fulfilling balance between her family's expectations and this new encounter that swipes her off her feet?

Mr. Matthew Nathaniel, while the son of a nobleman, has chosen a simple life. He prefers diving into books, when not actually writing them himself, and never shied away from work. When he sees the first girl that is enchanted by make believe worlds as much as he is, he immediately falls head over heels for her. Dreaming his way into a life he never imagined as potentially real, he invents marvelous disguises in order to conceal their

clandestine meetings. However, he knows that pursuing their love would be a fruitless endeavour, as the Burgess family would never allow their eldest daughter to wed a penniless, though noble-blooded book merchant. How far is he willing to go to prove he is worthy of their trust and Astrid's love?

The social obstacles do not stop the star-crossed lovers from writing poetry inspired by one another, and daydreaming about their idyllic, book-like romance. The reality of their frowned upon encounters though, abruptly hits them when Astrid receives a marriage proposal by another man. The thought of his beloved lady spending her life with another,

tortures Matthew's enamoured heart, but they both find themselves bound by their respective circumstances. Does Matthew have the strength to surpass the past, ask his father for forgiveness, and finally receive the inheritance that will end their suffering? Will Astrid uncover the bravery she will need to go against her family's wishes, for the love of her life?

Chapter 1

Rose Henshaw stood and tried hard to pretend she was not admiring herself in the full-length mirror situated in her mistress's bedchamber. After all the time over the previous weeks and the lessons that her mistress had imparted about how to present herself and act when in the company of other lords and ladies, it was only now that she finally got to put on the gown.

Of course, she had admired her mistress's clothes often, but it had always been from afar, either when she hung them in the huge wardrobe already filled with beautiful garments or upon her mistress's person on her days out attending functions or visiting with friends and acquaintances.

Yet, observing them on another was not quite

the same as being adorned in them herself, and Rose could not help feeling rather elegant dressed in the exquisite fabric that she was far from used to wearing.

While Rose and her mistress were near enough the same age, there being about a year between them, there was a slight difference in their size, for while Rose was average in height and slender, Lady Maxine Montague was a little shorter and rounder in places.

At no time had that deterred Lady Maxine, for she was determined for her rather unorthodox plan to go ahead, and after much pinching and tucking, the gown looked as though it had been made for Rose herself.

At first glance of herself in the mirror, Rose had struggled to repress a gasp, for while she had never admired herself in such attractive garb, the circumstances did not call for any celebration. Yet, she still could not deny,

having never been dressed in anything other than her ordinary clothes and perhaps, a simple pretty muslin frock for church on Sundays, that she was not quite amazed at the transformation that the mirror reflected back to her.

Apart from the unexpected feelings resulting from all Lady Maxine's pulling and tugging and adjusting, it had been the most bizarre experience. Rose had been Lady Maxine's personal maid since they were both young, for she had come into the employ of the household when Lady Maxine was only 12 years old and Rose had only reached her eleventh birthday.

She had attended to her mistress's hair and dress every day since for the last thirteen years, apart from the few allotted days off of which she was entitled. Yet, with the tables turned entirely, it was Lady Maxine who now attended to her, fussing around the gown to ensure it was a perfect fit and checking that Rose's hair held immaculately.

This situation would never have occurred under any other circumstances, a fact of which Rose was well aware, even without the constant reminders of her mistress. The bizarre situation in which she now found herself had been thought up by Lady Maxine alone, and in that vein, Lady Maxine was quite determined, at least in the beginning, that this ruse would be kept between herself and Rose.

Yet, in the weeks of planning and conniving previous to this very evening, Rose could not help wondering how that would be possible. The other servants may well witness her leaving the house, or when the driver of Lady Maxine's carriage had to help her in and out going to and from her destination, how would they explain it?

While her mistress did want to be made a fool of again, Rose could not help feeling that it would be impossible for questions not to be

asked, and after mentioning her concerns to Lady Maxine, the reality became a little clearer.

Under the threat of immediate dismissal, those in the household were sworn to secrecy, and while Rose counted herself a friend of her mistress, she did not doubt, after all the events that had occurred in the previous months, that she would not carry out her word.

Rose could not say she was unsatisfied with her life. She had decent lodgings and board, and though she had lost her parents some years back, she at least had secure employment for the foreseeable future. It was the best she could have hoped for given her own lower-class background, and yet, just like every other maid, she had dreamed many times what it would be like to live a lady's life.

When alone in her room once her work was finished, Rose enjoyed reading and devoured

many books she borrowed from Lady Maxine's library. Sometimes, they were novels of great ladies doing great things or romance where the heroine, being of strong mind, battled through emotional turmoil to remain steadfast in her principles.

It was usually after these stories that Rose allowed her mind to wander and, envisaging how graceful she would feel in those beautifully made gowns, and how pleasant it would be to be treated with the respect that those in the upper classes received, she would allow herself to daydream of a life that would never be hers.

Yet, she did not allow herself to get carried away and become melancholy. It was simply not to be, and while the daydream allowed her to fantasize, she was grounded enough to know that would never be her life.

There was never a circumstance where she

could ever imagine that she would get a chance to live out her fantasy, even for one evening, for that is what it had always been, just a dream of whimsical imagining, and yet, that is exactly where she now found herself.

Though she had been fortunate to be well educated by her parents, for they were both determined that if she were to work in a household, she would be assigned a job as a lady's companion or maid, Rose was well used to being ignored by the upper class or any visitors gracing Lady Maxine with their presence.

She was a maid, and maids were not of any importance. It was the life she had resigned herself to and, knowledgeable enough to know she had a reasonable place with her position, took to her work with determined effort and pride.

Yet, she could not have foreseen how the

dreadful circumstances that occurred only two months previously would impact her life so thoroughly. Nor could she have imagined that all those whimsical daydreams of living the life of a lady could ever come to fruition.

However, as the poet and playwright William Congreve wrote in his play, *The Mourning Bride*, 'Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned'. And Lady Maxine was indeed scorned.

Coming into Lady Maxine's life in a rather swift manner, for they met through a mutual friend and had not known of each other beforehand, Lord Glenburn had not only swept Lady Maxine off her feet, but after only a short time of knowing each other, had asked for her hand in marriage.

Of course, having spent days with them as a chaperone in their courtship, Rose had watched as her mistress's heart had soon been

lost to him, and Lady Maxine had been utterly thrilled at his proposal, for she could hardly believe that she had, at last, found true love.

Spending many hours in preparation, Rose had been by her side as they had discussed what would need to be done for the wedding, and her mistress had regaled her with what a wonderful day it would be.

Lady Maxine had already imagined all the higher society she would invite and who would attend to witness her marriage to Lord Glenburn. Her friends had been delighted for her in their visits, and they had all agreed that it was to be a grand wedding, and no doubt, the entire event would be talked about throughout London.

Having chosen her bridesmaids and sent out the invitations, Lady Maxine had travelled into town and bought a rather exquisite wedding dress with a veil to match, and Rose could not

help delighting in her mistress's happiness, for she could not say she had ever seen her so exhilarated.

Lady Maxine had been completely besotted, not only with the picture of what her future would look like but with the love she felt for Lord Glenburn, and to that end, she could hardly wait to become his wife.

Neither Rose nor Lady Maxine could have ever imagined, though, how quickly everything was to crumble and the dreadful pain that the supposedly wonderful Lord Glenburn would cause Rose's mistress. The grand wedding had been planned to take place next month; however, it had now been eight weeks since Lord Glenburn had eloped, running away with another woman and marrying her in haste.

Rose could hardly believe that the man would do such a thing, for even witnessing the two of them together, it appeared that both he and

Lady Maxine were gleefully happy. But when she had heard a fuller story amongst the servants' gossip when down in the kitchen, it became very clear that perhaps Lord Glenburn was not quite the gentleman he had portrayed himself to be.

Apparently, Lord Glenburn had known this other woman many years ago, and they had been childhood sweethearts. When her family moved away, they were separated and went on to live different lives. Having not seen each other in many years, Lord Glenburn was surprised when she came back into his life in a chance encounter, and it became clear, all the feelings they had had for each other all those years ago had returned. Perhaps, Rose surmised, they had never left.

Yet, even with her discovery of what had happened, Rose could still not condone his behaviour. If he did indeed find out that he was still madly in love with another woman, why not simply cut the engagement with Lady Maxine and wait a suitable period to court and

marry the woman later on, rather than humiliating Lady Maxine so publicly?

The cowardly man had not even come to see Lady Maxine to inform her that the engagement was over. Instead, he had sent a missive, simply apologising and telling her he must follow the yearnings of his heart and that he would not have been truly happy in a life with her, knowing that this other woman still felt the same for him. In the end, it had all been about his happiness, and the message, while apologetic, had hardly acknowledged the pain and heartache he had caused Lady Maxine.

To say the poor lady had been heartbroken would be quite the understatement, for she did not leave her bedchamber for nearly two weeks. Rose had tried her very best in her attempt to soothe and comfort her, but there was little one could do when a person's heart was in tiny pieces.

For the first week, she had hardly let anything pass her lips, and Rose feared for her health. In the following week, Lady Maxine had at least took some thin soup, which, if nothing else, had kept her hydrated.

There were many tears and much self-pity to begin with, but as the weeks passed, pity had turned to anger, and Lady Maxine had grown furious at the entire situation. With her rage came a deep sense of injustice, and she had desired to know, with a passion, what this woman had that she did not, and what she might do to win Lord Glenburn back.

Rose felt but had never voiced that her idea of winning him back was rather pointless. Besides the fact that he was now, indeed, married, why would Lady Maxine want to spend her life with a man who had treated her so dreadfully?

He had humiliated her in front of all society and, having to announce that both the engagement and the wedding were now cancelled, Lady Maxine had hardly felt able to show her face since.

It made little sense to Rose why Lady Maxine would want to chase after such a man, and yet, she was resigned to keep quiet and keep her feelings to herself. It was the furious injustice that had compelled Lady Maxine to discover information on her ex-betrothed and new bride and, in her determination, she had concocted a rather extravagant plan. A plan of which, Rose was now the centre, and with the demise of her mistress's temperament, had had little choice but to reluctantly acquiesce for fear that she may well be dismissed if she did not go along with it.

Chapter 2

Lady Maxine had spent the last few weeks instructing Rose on how to act in the company of society, and though it was not anything Rose did not already know, for she had attended functions and accompanied Lady Maxine on visits to her friends and acquaintances houses often, Lady Maxine was still single-minded in her resolution.

The invite to the ball that evening had arrived several weeks ago, which had given Lady Maxine the exact opportunity to now put her plan into action.

The strategy sounded simple, but as with many complex ideas, it was often easier said than actually carried out. Rose was to attend the ball as a lady of society and discover all she could about Lord Glenburn and his new

wife.

She was then to report back all she had learned to her mistress, though Rose was still confused about what end it would serve. The man was now married to another woman, and any information on either of them could hardly be any use, for even in her ramblings and determination to know, Lady Maxine had not stated how the information could be used to her benefit.

At first, Rose had worried that if she were to get too close, Lord Glenburn may well recognise her, but Lady Maxine had assured her that once she was dressed as a lady, there was no possible way he would mistake her for a servant. Besides, her mistress had continued, the man had hardly given Rose a second glance when he had spent time with Lady Maxine, as was the usual way with the upper class.

Rose, of course, could hardly argue with that point, for she knew well that Lady Maxine's perception was true. For the most part, she would be doubtful if he could even recall her name, for she could not remember one time he had actually interacted with her in the time he had been courting Lady Maxine.

‘Now, I think you will do. It is hardly perfection but given how you are dressed and if you do everything I have instructed, and you must follow my instructions to the letter, Rose,’ Lady Maxine emphasised firmly. ‘Then I think it may just work,’ she said, walking around Rose and appraising her with a derogatory gaze as though she were an item of possession that she was not entirely happy with.

‘My Lady, I am still concerned ...’

‘We have discussed this, Rose. It will be fine.’ The curt tone cut Rose off mid-speech, yet,

even fearing she would be reprimanded, Rose could not help herself, for her fear of going to this ball was currently much greater than any fear of discipline from her mistress.

‘Yet, what if I am discovered? Perhaps someone will see right through this entire ruse and know that I am not a lady at all. What if I come upon someone who recognises me, and I am found out?’

‘You think anyone looking at you now will know you are my maid?’ Lady Maxine near snorted. ‘Come now, Rose, you have never looked so fine. Anyone who even glanced at you would not, for a second, think that you were some lowly servant. We have worked too hard and too long for this to fail now. If you do as I have taught you, nothing can happen, and no one will discover you. Now, swallow your fear, and lift your chin. Remember what I have told you, for I do not need to remind you of the consequences of you not doing what I ask of you.’

‘Yes, My Lady,’ Rose replied sheepishly.

How could she forget, for it mattered little that there had been years of history between them, Lady Maxine was still her mistress, and Rose was still a servant. Lady Maxine had made it perfectly clear that if her instructions were not followed, Rose could be replaced in the morrow.

Whereas Rose had always thought there was a friendship between them of sorts, the recent circumstances had changed Lady Maxine, and the pleasantness of her previous temperament had been buried beneath her anger and bitterness.

She had not been a bad mistress to her over the years, but since this whole debacle with Lord Glenburn, Lady Maxine’s broken heart appeared to have hardened, and she now took

out her pain on anyone who might be near her.

Still, while Lady Maxine's disposition had changed over the last several weeks, Rose could not help feeling sorry for her. She had observed her being so deliriously happy with her upcoming wedding and the idea of a wonderful future with her new husband. In fact, Rose had near celebrated with her. But the abruptness of the sudden change had damaged her immensely.

Her world had been so swiftly dashed to pieces as the hope of her happy ever after had been snatched from her grasp. And on top of the heartache, the public humiliation had been too much to bear. Rose doubted that any other person could have handled it differently, for it could do little to a person's outlook other than making them bitter.

Perhaps it had impacted her mistress even

more deeply because Lady Maxine had not really garnered much attention from many gentlemen before that. While her brown eyes were quite genteel and complemented her brown hair fittingly, she had always been a rather plain woman.

Unlike her more glamorous and prettier friends, Lady Maxine hardly turned heads when she walked into a room, and reaching the age of twenty-five, she had perhaps started to worry for her future.

It was something she had heard Lady Maxine complain about often when her lady friends came to visit, for no one wanted to be left behind when it came to being wedded. Though her friends, in their fickle support, or so Rose felt by their near sneering comments, had always dismissed her derogatory remarks about herself and having near ignored her concern, had continued talking about themselves.

Therefore, when Lord Glenburn, who, Rose had to admit, was hardly strikingly handsome himself, had suddenly set his sights upon her, Lady Maxine had been delighted. Finally, she had now caught the attention of a man who wanted to spend his life with her, for the idea of being left as a spinster appeared, in Lady Maxine's eyes and the eyes of her friends anyway, like some dreadful curse.

Rose would never say such a thing, for she would likely be fired on the spot, but she had realised that Lady Maxine had grabbed onto the idea of marriage to a man she hardly knew, far too quickly. It almost felt like an act of desperation, though Rose could not deny that Lady Maxine had appeared to have deep feelings for the man.

Yet, perhaps in her fear of being left behind, she had allowed herself to believe that she loved Lord Glenburn, when actually, it had been more the idea of being married that she

had fallen in love with, and if that indeed were the case, it had only made the entire betrayal of Lord Glenburn so much worse.

It mattered little now, for the man had run off and married another woman, and there was little Lady Maxine could do about it, which only concerned Rose more. She was being sent to this ball on this evening to spy on the man and to bring back information, and as she now regarded herself in the full-length mirror one last time, the strange discomfort in the pit of her stomach caused her mind to race with what she had allowed herself to be forced into.

If Lady Maxine was wrong and she was to be found out, what would happen to her? She too would be publicly humiliated, and perhaps, to save face and distance herself from the scandal, Lady Maxine may well dismiss her anyway. Yet, what choice did she currently have?

Lady Maxine had spent hours over the last few weeks instructing Rose on how to sip tea, what topics to discuss, how to greet other nobles around her, and even how to dance. After all that time and effort, if she backed out now at the last minute, Rose had no doubt of the result, for, in her current temperament, she knew well that Lady Maxine would punish her verily, and Rose simply had nowhere else to go.

Taking a deep breath in, Rose turned from the mirror, lifted her chin, and clasped her reticule, attempting to ignore the nerves that had grown from a small tightening sensation and had now begun to bubble deep in her tummy. It was nearly time for her to leave, for the carriage had already been summoned, yet Rose could not deny that the idea of the evening that lay ahead terrified her.

Not only was she attending this ball pretending to be a lady, but she was about to rub shoulders with the people she ordinarily

would serve tea and cakes to. The notion of holding a conversation with such caused her deep anxiety, for if she were to fail, there would be consequences that she did not wish to consider.

‘You need not worry, Rose. You are quite handsome in all your finery. Just remember, you are Lady Rose Finch, and you are visiting London from York. It is only one ball, Rose. These people will never meet Lady Rose Finch again after tonight.’

‘Yes, My Lady,’ Rose replied.

She then turned and left the bedchamber, and as she walked down the hallway to the staircase, realised she was about to face the most terrifying evening of her life so far.

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